

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media

No. 60

Spring 2021

Source: ejumpcut.org

Jump Cut was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in 1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

This electronic version was created with the approval of the *Jump Cut* editor. It was generated from Web pages and thus some of the formatting is a bit awkward.

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Current issue

No. 60, spring 2021

Pandemic, platforms, and pedagogy

[Zoom in the past conditional](#)

by Gary Kafer

While Zoom claims to make us increasingly present to each other, such a promise fails to register how video conferencing is unevenly experienced across lines of sociopolitical difference in times of crisis. Rather than the temporality of the present, this essay tracks another tense—the past conditional— that better exposes the systems of power that make networked connection possible.

[Professoring and parenting in a pandemic](#)

by Giovanna Chesler

Interviews with university educators who are parents to young children and the urgent challenges they faced to teach both students *and* their children at home amidst a global pandemic.

[Teaching in times of protest and pandemic](#)

by Brenda Longfellow, Liz Miller, Dorit Naaman

Three Canadian activist/documentarists/ production teachers reflect on the trials and tribulations of teaching online in times of protest and pandemic.

[Teaching online on borrowed time: Hong Kong protests, pandemics, and MOOCs](#)

by Gina Marchetti

As a British colony before 1997 and as a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (SAR) until 2047, Hong Kong exists as a “borrowed place” on “borrowed time.” Burdened by a colonial legacy of plagues and protests, Hong Kong's women face the 2020 COVID-19 crisis on their own time as seen in the territory's rich screen culture and approach to online pedagogy.

[Mapping the promises and perils of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic: Peru's case](#)

by Gabriela Martinez and Keya Saxena

As COVID-19 has changed education, a case study of Peru reveals a new precedence of learning *spaces over places* in digital environments. The study presents theoretical contributions about the *(de)construction of environments, the space divide, and mediated flux*.

Witnessing and activism

[Time in the age of the Coronavirus and #BlackLivesMatter: a dossier](#)

by Cara Caddoo, Travis Wright, Jaicey Bledsoe.

- [Synchronicity, social media, and the modern protest movement](#)

by Cara Caddoo

In the blink of an eye, social media has transformed Black Lives Matter into

a protest movement of global proportions. In order to understand how this happened, we need to consider the longer history of media in the struggle for Black Freedom.

- [My journey to 2020 Activism Lane](#)

by Jaicey Bledsoe

- [Social media and continuity in the Black freedom struggle](#)

by Travis Wright

An historical examination of relations between media and Black community protest demonstrates how the contemporary movement for Black lives is part of a much longer and complicated history for Black freedom and racial justice in the United States.

- [Further resources](#)

by Cara Caddoo

A short list of the books, articles, interview, and podcasts that have informed our conversations about social media and our historical present.

[Connective and collective practices:](#)

[\(small\) media activism in the twenty-first century: a dossier](#)

by Chris Robé

A dossier peppered with a few autobiographical moments to assist in comprehending some of the major transformations of the past twenty years of digital media activism. It's written in a highly digestible format ideally suited for educators, community organizers, and others who would like to discuss such ideas with those less familiar with them.

[Media during the COVID-19 pandemic: big and high, small and low](#)

by Patricia R. Zimmermann and Dale Hudson

We need to understand COVID-19 media according to modalities of “big and high” (drone videos, cable news, Hollywood) and “small and low” (community media, file-sharing, and citizen documentation) to understand the pandemic's uneven and accumulated effects, alongside moments of potential for greater equity and justice, around the world.

[Documentary activism across multiple media platforms](#)

by Inez Hedges

Review of Angela Aguayo, *Documentary Resistance: Social Change and Participatory Media*. Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Documentary across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place, and Politics*.

Special Section: Queer TV

[Goopy connections: a little detour en route](#)

by Joëlle Rouleau, editor of special section

Can television be queer? What would that look like? Can television hold space for complexity? Does TV drive social change, especially in terms of gender? This special section seeks to question the representations, receptions, perverse readings (Staiger, 2000) and fan creations around the so-called LGBTQ+ spectrum in audiovisual media.

Ambiguities

[Bat signals and caped crusading: the ins and outs of the CW's *Batwoman*](#)

by Lynne Joyrich

Through a reading of *Batwoman*'s first season, this piece suggests that, even in an age that's been labeled post-closet (not to mention post-television), mediatized meanings of sexuality do not simply depend on receiving (bat) signals—as if they offer clear-cut messages—and of (caped) crusading for identities—as if those too are clear, pre-formed, and able just to be unmasked. Rather, the complicated, seemingly contradictory, and sometimes confounding logics of television continue to impact us, constructing complex relations of knowledges and ignorances, recognitions and misrecognitions, identifications and disidentifications.

[Introducing Taylor Mason: *Billions* and the first non-binary character in a mainstream U.S. television series](#)

by Kinga Erzepki

With their insider's skills but outsider's perspective, Taylor immediately emerges a contrarian and a new type of hero in the high finance world, while the series continues its calculated subversions of the conventional representation of Wall Street.

[A fine balance along the Mechitza: navigating privilege, pinkwashing, and Palestinian politics in *Transparent*'s fourth season](#)

by Jordan Z. Adler

When the Pfeffermans sojourned to Israel in the fourth season of Amazon's *Transparent*, it was the rare example of an U.S. series contending with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But the results were mixed, as refreshing portraits of queer life in the Middle East bumped up against the characters' reluctance to acknowledge geopolitical realities.

[Living out loud: Queen Latifah and Black queer television production](#)

by Lauren Herold

Analyzing Queen Latifah's labor as producer and star in *Bessie* (HBO, 2015) and *The Wiz Live!* (NBC, 2015) reveals how Latifah infuses her commercial television projects with references to Black queer history, community, and culture. The methodological approach allows queer media studies to avoid assumptions or declarations of "outness" by more private celebrities

[All About that Ace: representing asexuality and queer identity in *BoJack Horseman*](#)

by Sarah E. S. Sinwell

The character of Todd Chavez (voiced by Aaron Paul) from *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014-2020) has been recognized as the first television character to come out as asexual. Studying how the show represents asexuality and LGBTQIA+ identities through his character and others, this essay examines how asexuality can be understood in relation to the construction of animated animals and the idea of the human/non-human.

[Queerbaiting: an explanation of how a straight female almost bought a fabulous bed](#)

by Christina Hodel

Joseph Brennan's *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities* explains how media makers attract LGBTQ audiences by hinting at same-sex relationships between characters, though they're never actually consummated, thus exploiting a marginalized group.

Trans-iting

[The futures of queer television](#)

by Jack Halberstam with Joëlle Rouleau

An interview with Jack Halberstam

Exploring the paradox of "queer television," this interview asks, "What's happening with television?" Observing the rise in LGBTQ+ representations, Halberstam considers the impacts of such a transformation, especially as they are made visible through serialized, complex TV.

[***Sense8 and sensibility, or how it became necessary to queer the world in order to save it***](#)

by Deborah Shaw and Rob Stone

This analysis of the Netflix series *Sense8* explores the queer, transgender and transnational utopianism of the series and celebrates its fans.

[***The queer politics of stealth gameplay***](#)

by Toni Pape

Stealth gameplay is about the tactical creation of imperceptibility. By looking at how stealth gameplay transforms hostile environments in a way that can also minimize harm, this essay argues for stealth gameplay's potential for a queer political ethos

[***Queer stabilization of gender and queer regulation of sexuality in I Am Jazz***](#)

by Mary Zaborskis

The TLC reality show *I Am Jazz* features a version of trans childhood where sexuality is an explicit preoccupation. The series represents and assimilates Jazz's sexuality in queer ways that are ultimately in the service of securing a non-threatening narrative of trans identity and development for viewers.

[***Opening the field of transgender audience reception***](#)

by Beck Banks

Review of Andre Cavalcante, *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life*

Camp

[***"Something to disclose"—notes on Disclosure and the possibility of trans camp***](#)

by Sid Cunningham

Increased trans representation in mainstream film and television may ultimately fail to disrupt negative stereotypes or produce real political gains, but *Disclosure's* (2020) survey of a century of trans images tempers any disappointment with camp pleasure.

[***Queer TV performances that time forgot***](#)

by Katharine Mussellam

Review of Quinlan Miller, *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Television History*
Miller re-examines television history to reveal the importance of genderqueer performances in sitcoms.

[***Queer eye for reel Latinx: camp, chic and queer familia in Ugly Betty and One Day at a Time***](#)

Astrid M. Fellner

Ugly Betty and *One Day at a Time* are queer TV shows because they manage to challenge norms of beauty, ethnicity, family, and heterosexuality through a performance of *camp latinidad*.

Pedagogy

[***Can Queer TV teach on its own?***](#)

by Alexis Poirier-Samure

Review of Ava Laure Parsemain, *The Pedagogy Of Queer TV*.

Is queer televisual representation a standalone teacher, or should we construe it as a generative, but not autonomous, queer pedagogical tool?

[Better worlds: queer pedagogy and utopia in *Sex Education* and *Schitt's Creek*](#)

by Tanya Horeck

In their depiction of better, queerer worlds, *Sex Education* and *Schitt's Creek* offer politically progressive forms of escapist delight

[Queer and trans filmmaking: a new pedagogy](#)

Beck Banks and Miche Dreiling in
interview with Joëlle Rouleau

Navigating queer and trans sensibilities through academia and film production, these three filmmakers get together to compare “how we make movies.” Their individual film practices and research careers let them create a new form of pedagogy, informed by their own experiences as queer and trans scholars.

Reality TV

[Pre-making drag: *RuPaul's Drag Race* spoiler fandom
and queer temporal imagination](#)

by Sean Donovan

In *RuPaul's Drag Race* fan communities online, competition spoilers—revealing future casts of drag queens aspiring to be America’s next drag superstar—prove to be an evocative form of queer fandom, restructuring media authority and creating ephemeral “before *Drag Race*” archives for competing queens that relish drag’s utopian potential against the show’s political limitations.

[Are you my perfect match? Reality TV as a stage for
queer authenticity in MTV's *Are You the One?*](#)

by Philippa Orme

Analyzing MTV’s “sexually fluid” season of *Are You the One?* (2014-) unearths the disruptions between authenticity and performance at the heart of reality TV’s mode of representation and reconsiders the opportunities and challenges this genre presents as a stage for lived queer identity.

Politics

[The queer politics of Korean Variety TV: state, industry and genre](#)

by Grace Jung

South Korea’s anti-queerness is visible on an industrial and state level in the analysis of laws, the TV industry, and episodes of *Ask Us Anything*. *Ask Us Anything* also transgresses queer suppression and homophobia by exhibiting high camp elements, queer startexts, frequent gender bending and trans gender queer subjectivity despite the industry’s maintenance of a highly hegemonic-masculinist workplace practice through unquestioned hierarchies and exclusion of women

[Cable access queer: revisiting *Toronto Living with AIDS* \(1990-1991\)](#)

by Ryan Conrad

Analyzing the Canadian AIDS activist community television series *Toronto Living With AIDS* provides insight into how this extraordinary program came to be, how it was received by various imagined publics, how it ended, and why revisiting this series is useful for today’s video activists.

Film and TV

[Adaptation as queer fan practice in Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*](#)

by Yaghma Kaby

Examining the NBC series *Hannibal* provides insight into the ways in which this adaptation—as a queer fan practice of its creator, Bryan Fuller—both reveals and rectifies the erasures of its queerphobic source texts.

[Queer adaption and *becoming* in NBC's *Hannibal*](#)

by Patrick Woodstock

Review of Kavita Mudan Finn and EJ Nielsen, eds.. *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's *Hannibal**

This review focuses on a new edited collection about the NBC series *Hannibal*, outlining the various ways in which its authors queer the notions of seriality and adaptation while addressing the homophobia and transphobia endemic to the show's source texts.

[Beyond the gaze: seeing and being seen in contemporary queer media](#)

by Nicole Morse and Lauren Herold

Exploring haptic visuality in contemporary queer film and TV, this essay engages what feminist media producer Joey Soloway calls "feeling seeing" as a methodological approach to analyzing the affective dimensions of queer love and vulnerability on screen from *Carol* to "San Junipero" to *Moonlight*.

[Horror\(:\) television](#)

by Yaghma Kaby

Review of Linda Belau and Kimberly Jackson, editors. *Horror Television in the Age of Consumption: Binging on Fear*.

Linda Belau and Kimberly Jackson's anthology offers critical readings of U.S. television series in the horror genre, while simultaneously expanding the possibilities of defining the genre.

["Maybe you should handle dinner." Food-based domesticity in *Veronica Mars*' regendered neo-noir trauma narrative](#)

by Teresa Caprioglio

Veronica Mars flipped the script early in its run, but re-gendering the noir detective has double-edged implications for the no-longer-teen-girl detective and her homme fatal in Hulu's season 4 takeover.

[Science fiction paradox and the transgender look: how time travel queers spectatorship in *Predestination*](#)

by Jenée Wilde

The science fiction film *Predestination* (2014) moves beyond genre action thriller to engage with dramatic realism through its time-traveling intersex protagonist and, in the process, upends normative viewer assumptions about gender and sexuality.

India and Pakistan

[Male subjectivity in New India: examining *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* and *Pad Man*](#)

by Ananya

Two contemporary Hindi films *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017) and *Pad Man* (2018) trace the figuration of a distinct male subjectivity found in Narendra Modi's New India.

["Brand Priyanka Chopra": neoliberal individuality, citizenship, and the transnational female celebrity](#)

by Namrata Rele Sathe

An enquiry into the multifaceted, transnational celebrity of Priyanka Chopra

reveals the contradictions her star-brand presents within the real-life contexts of politics, gender and nationality.

[Pakistani women and the "Other": a study of *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*](#)

by Sonal Vij

Even though the Pakistani TV drama *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* has "sold" well for being a progressive representation of women and a woman-focused drama, it ultimately is nothing but a guide to hegemonic regulations of the "new emerging women" in Pakistani society.

[Cinema and its spatial predicates: landscapes of debt in search of justice](#)

by Akshaya Kumar

This essay makes sense of the trauma of cinematic un-belonging, whether sedimented over a landscape situated in the crevices of caste-revenge and justice, or extracted from nonplussed strangers trapped in the photographic meanwhile of Hindi cinema's ground-zero, via two landmark films situated orthogonal to popular cinema's straightforward certitudes.

[New Cinema Movement and the "no land's man": questions of land in *Ankur* and *Aakrosh*](#)

by Soumya Suvra Das

From early post-independence Hindi films like *Do Bigha Zameen* to New Cinema Movement's *Ankur* and *Aakrosh*, land as a central category in the cinematic imagination of Indian identity has made it imperative to trace the nature of social conflicts with agrarian, pre-capitalist communities and Hindi cinema's response towards them.

Film for a pandemic

[Catastrophic politics: the disaster film and respite from privacy](#)

by Todd McGowan

As a genre, the disaster film confronts a privatized world and presents us with a path toward establishing a public realm that privileges life in common.

[Screening Jane Austen: Austen, adaptation, and life at a distance](#)

by Jamison Kantor

In image-centric times, how should scholars and teachers approach the Austen industry's dialogue-centric media? As always, Jane has an answer!

[The unbearable monstrosity of bodies](#)

by Eric Falardeu

Review of Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond, eds., *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence*.

How can the concept of abjection help us understand our past and current media landscape?

Rethinking media historicity

[The history of *Jump Cut*: 2013 interview with Julia Lesage and Chuck Kleinhans](#)

by Rox Samer

Eugene, OR, July 2013. Conducted as a part of Rox Samer's dissertation research. Transcribed and edited by Julia Lesage, May 2020.

[Did pre-1979 Iranian cinema produce Third Cinema productions?](#)

[Pre-1979 Iranian Films and the question of Third Cinema](#)

by Asefeh Sadeghi-Esfahlani

Industrial, political, formal and hegemonic obstacles to the development of Third

Cinema in pre-1979 Iranian cinema.

[Wild Archaeology and the changing face of Canadian documentary](#)

by Peter Steven

Tracy German's *Wild Archaeology* represents the explosion of Indigenous arts and media now underway in Canada and demonstrates a new excitement around the field of Indigenous archaeology.

[The apostle desacralized: melancholic aesthetics and the specter of assembly in José Martí: *Eye of the Canary*](#)

by Eric Morales-Franceschini

A survey of cinematic renditions of Cuba's national hero, José Martí, with special attention to Fernando Pérez's critically acclaimed *El ojo del canario* (2010) and its (dis)avowals of constituent power.

[Feminist re-voicings in *Yours in Sisterhood*](#)

by Tessa Dwyer

Some thoughts on Irene Lutzig's documentary *Yours in Sisterhood* (2018), feminism's recent history, mediated voice and cinema made strange through processes of reverse dubbing.

[A materialist phenomenology of TV in the age of the hyper-serial](#)

by Mike Wayne

Review of Denis Broe, *Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and the End of Leisure*. The television serial has mutated in the context of neo-liberal capitalism.

[Established and emerging filmmakers in Hong Kong: a generational tug-of-war](#)

by Fangyu Chen

Alongside the dominating Hong Kong/Mainland co-productions has emerged an alternative filmic landscape led by the young generation of filmmakers in Hong Kong. They make new features different from the established generation—namely more self-expressive, locally-concerned and politically-minded—with films rooted deep in the region's economy, culture, and politics.

Confrontation / Resistance / Resilience

[War on Terror Westerns and the specter of imperial decline](#)

by Shakti Jaising

War on Terror Westerns of the last decade provide valuable insight into a U.S. empire in decline.

[Immersive soundscapes: Rana Eid's *Panoptic*](#)

by Norman Saadi Nikro

Analysis of the intensity of acoustic spheres, sound and noise, memory and affliction, in the cinematic style of the Lebanese filmmaker and sound engineer Rana Eid, in respect to her 2017 film *Panoptic*.

[Indigenous feminism revitalizing the long take:](#)

[*Waru and The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open*](#)

by Missy Molloy

Waru and The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open demonstrate the utility of long takes in strengthening Indigenous feminist filmmaking, which is currently gaining traction as a result of ambitious and collaborative films that spotlight the experiences of Indigenous women in remarkably varied circumstances.

Class

[Trouble in the heartland: class and culture in *American Honey*](#)

by Milo Sweedler

In a fascinating retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, Andrea Arnold's *American Honey* sheds light on both the ongoing class war and the tumultuous culture wars that have consumed the United States in recent years.

[Animal kingdom: the body politics of *The Favourite*](#)

by Jamison Kantor

Jorgos Lanthimos's grotesque, eccentric period piece reveals a central principle in conservative restorations (during the 18th and 21st centuries alike): the priority of certain kinds of bodies over others.

["Beautifully represented" or an attack on our culture?](#)

[Netflix's *Gentefied* and the struggle over *Latinidad/es*](#)

by Richard Mwakasege-Minaya and Juri Sanchez

Netflix's *Gentefied*'s (2020-) reception among Latinxs is important for the ways in which it constitutes a contentious struggle over *Latinidades* (varying iterations of "Latinness") by the show's supporters (who celebrate *Gentefied*'s foregrounding of Latinx marginality—working-class, LGBT+, and Black Latinxs) and its critics (who condemned the show's representation as negative depictions of Latinxs and endured a monolithic conception of Latinxs).

The last word

[Since the last issue](#)

by Julia Lesage

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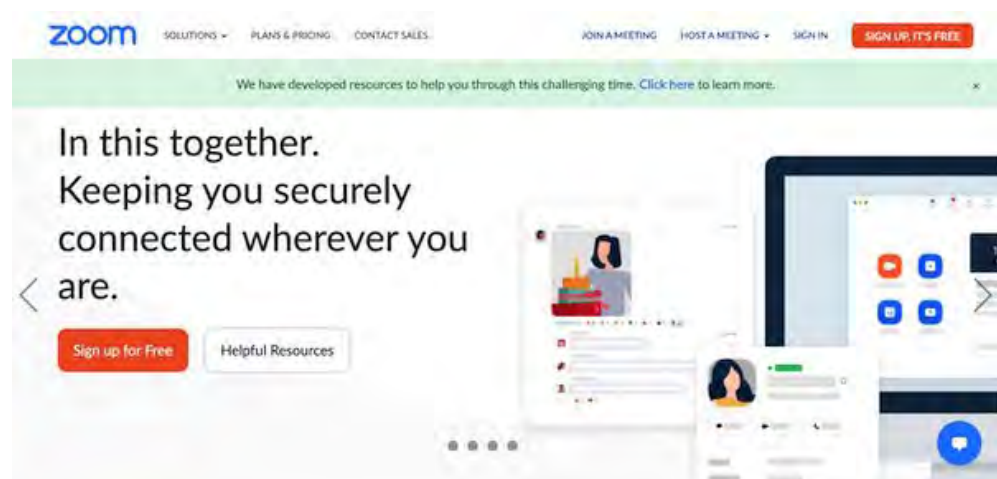


A meme that circulated in social media. The sudden success of Zoom caused many to joke that the company was the mastermind behind the pandemic.

Zoom in the past conditional

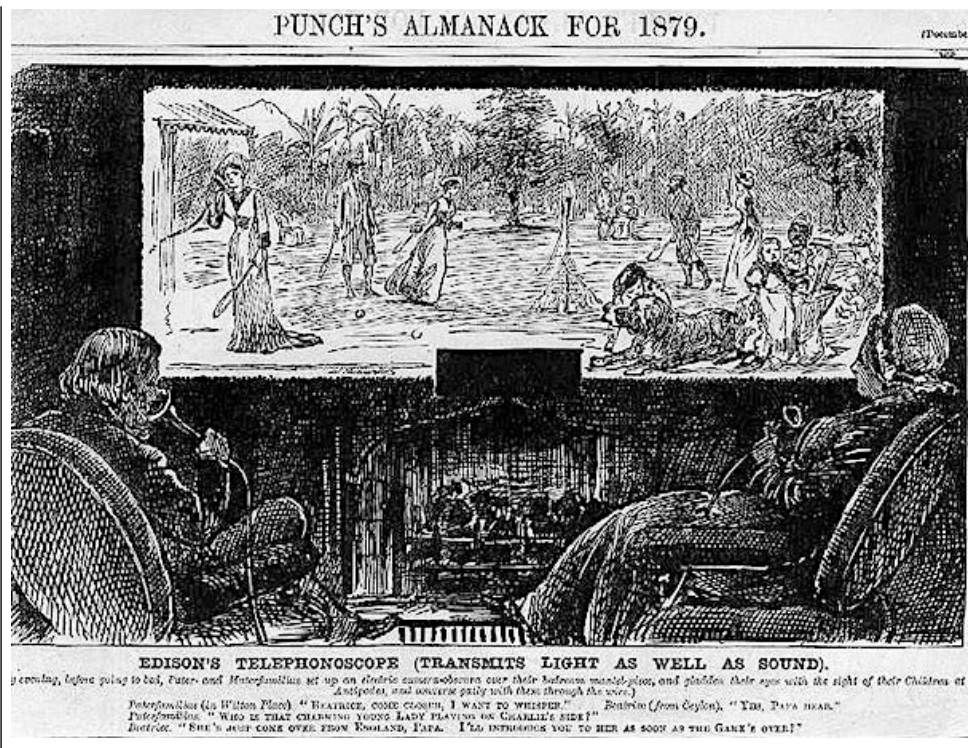
by [Gary Kafer](#)

Video teleconferencing makes us ever more present to each other: always-on, always peripherally addressable by the network. Every class, meeting, conference, and performance, no matter where they might take place physically, is a now virtual affair whose only point of entry is a hyperlink. At the forefront of this luxury is Zoom, the video teleconferencing platform now synonymous with the COVID-19 pandemic. Founded in 2011, Zoom has only more recently ascended into the upper echelon of Silicon Valley (known as the “Three Commas Club,” symbolizing a net worth of a billion dollars or more) after witnessing a 1,900% increase in its overall usage due to social distancing guidelines and the intensification of remote labor.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] In addition to its widespread adoption, what makes the platform so auspicious as an icon of our historical present is how it claims a certain brand of digital ubiquity.[2] With real-time telecommunications, we have no excuse not to show up anymore; indeed, where else is there to go in the midst of a pandemic? As the company states on the landing page of its website: “In this together. Keeping you securely connected wherever you are.” Zoom lets you be present from anywhere, even during “this challenging time.”



On its website, Zoom markets video teleconferencing as a critical resource to stay connected during this pandemic.

This narrative is no doubt familiar. Communications media have long confounded the boundaries between the local and global, here and there, through what McKenzie Wark terms *telesthesia* or “perception at a distance.”[3] The telegraph, telephone, and television all attest to the enduring desire to bridge the gulf between the near and the remote, to bring what is distant close as a site of action and sensemaking.



An imaginary telephoscope conceptualized by George du Maurier published in *Punch* magazine in 1878 following the invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell two years prior. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_videotelephony#/media/File:Telephoscope.jpg



In the late 1920s, Bell Telephone Laboratories experimented with a two-way television system that would allow users to see and hear each other at the same time. *Bell Telephone Quarterly* 9.3 (1930): 160.



Introduced in Japan in 1999, the Kyocera VP-210 Visual Phone is often acknowledged as the first commercial mobile videophone. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_videotelephony#/media/File:Kyocera_VP-210_CP+_2011.jpg



The first webcam in 1991 starred a coffee pot next to the Trojan Room in the old Computer Laboratory at the University of Cambridge.
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trojan_Room_coffee_pot#/media/File:Trojan_Room_coffee_pot_xcoffee.png



A popular TikTok comedian mimics how exhausting it can feel to socialize on Zoom. See the full video here:
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMJXmQtXD>

Writing in the late 1980s, Manuel Castells observed how the material arrangements of information and telecommunications infrastructures gave rise to a new configuration of telesthesia, a global “space of flows,” which supports continuous and simultaneous social practices at a distance.[4] This digital network is the precise terrain of video teleconferencing platforms—including Zoom, but also Skype (founded 2003), Big Blue Button (2009), FaceTime (2010), Talky (2013), Jitsi Videobridge (2013), Discord (2015), Google Duo (2016), and Microsoft Teams (2017). Such platforms have long been employed in courts, hospitals, businesses, and universities to allow multiple people to communicate in real-time, sharing files, audio recordings, documents, and spreadsheets.[5]

But something remarkable has happened since the beginning of 2020. Framed by the pandemic, video teleconferencing—perhaps Zoom specifically—is no longer simply concerned with bringing the distant near through real-time communication. Instead, such platforms have entered into our historical present armed with a promise of social repair, to restore an experience of connectivity abruptly lost in times of crisis. Perhaps then the *new*-ness of Zoom as another configuration of telesthesia poses a far less relevant concern than the novel forms of experience guaranteed by video telephony amid ongoing social and political upheaval.[6] Such crises of course include the COVID-19 pandemic, but also other concurrent calamities that have come to frame our experience of the common. These include global warming and ecological ruin, anti-Black violence and mass incarceration, the continuing rise of authoritarian fascism and white supremacy, and the metastasizing tumor of U.S. imperialism on the global stage. Throughout all this, we hang our hopes on platforms like Zoom to restore our horizons of expectation and convention, to help us recuperate a scene of belonging so thoroughly effaced so as not to be recognizable anymore as a scene from which we might depart together. And the funny thing is that we give ourselves over to this digital network despite how unrelentingly lonely it makes us feel.

There are perhaps many ways to narrate what I take to be Zoom’s promise of social repair, but for me this is a story about time. More specifically, it’s a story about the experience of time made possible by Zoom and how we endure that time—sometimes together, but very often not. In this essay, I argue that Zoom’s promise of social repair hinges on its perceived affinity to the present (or hyper-present) as the premiere temporal modality of networked culture. In this framework, technologies like video teleconferencing consolidate the many diverse temporalities of the world into the *now* of real-time, synchronous action. Importantly, this networked *now* articulates new forms of embodiment and sociality within the technics of electronic presence. Through Zoom’s publicity materials and the use of the platform in reality television, I track how this electronic presence promises to alleviate the pangs of disconnection felt most acutely in the midst of the pandemic.

And yet, as we have come to find, the temporality of electronic presence is at odds with the material conditions that shape our collective realities—conditions now more starkly lit by the temporalities of crisis that have dislocated whatever experience of the commons we might have had before. In the second half of this essay, I locate a different tense—the past conditional—to speculate on how video teleconferencing mediates the social not with a promise, but as a failed potentiality that only now in retrospect seems to contour our shared frameworks of crisis management. As opposed to the present, the past conditional dilates the modes of disconnection (be that technological, economic, racial, geographic, ecological, political, social, or otherwise) that underlie Zoom’s promise of social repair. And in doing so, the past conditional likewise opens up alternative temporal trajectories of electronic presence that gesture towards submerged forms of connection beyond the network itself. Ultimately, by considering the medial tense of Zoom through the past conditional, I argue that we might better

account for our own orientation to the network, our capacity to be addressed by others, and our mode of arrival to a scene of belonging at a very time when who inhabits this “we” is made increasingly uncertain by crisis upon crisis upon crisis.

A promise

The time of networks is the time of the *now*, the present, the real-time, and the simultaneous. Networked media render the world as a modular, scalable, and flexible system of communication relays in which any and all information is accessible with a simple click. In this network, differences in time and place mean nothing. Where you dwell in the world is less important than your ability to become synchronized to the ever-present *now* of the network. Anyone who has ever missed a Zoom meeting on account of being in a different time zone than the host knows this all too well. Writing in the early 1990s, Vivian Sobchack took stock of this *now* of networked media as giving way to a new aesthetic mode of “electronic presence.” As she argues, digital technologies not only mediate our own sense of being-in-the world, but constitute it. To quote at length from her essay “The Scene of the Screen”:

“A function of technological (and televisual) pervasion and (World-Wide-Web) dispersion, this new electronic sense of presence is intimately bound up in a centerless, network-like structure of the *present*, of instant stimulation and impatient desire, rather than in photographic nostalgia for the past or cinematic anticipation of the future [...] and this electronic world incorporates the spectator/user uniquely in a spatially decentered, weakly temporalized and quasi-disembodied (or diffusely embodied) state.” [7]

If for Marshall McLuhan electronic media extend or augment the body and its capacities for information processing across time and space, for Sobchack “the electronic tends to marginalize or trivialize the human body.” [8] Obliterated by digital rendition and experienced only as a form of temporal discontinuity, the body becomes homogenized in its re-appearance within the ever-expanding present. A data profile or a flicker on the screen, this new electronic body emerges everywhere and nowhere, eternally connected and interactive.



In order to distinguish the cinematic image from the electronic image, Sobchack analyzes the famous scene from *Blade Runner* (1982) in which Deckard's “electronic eye” enables him to modulate and enhance space and to peer around corners in ways previously unavailable to the photographic medium.

Sobchack's essay is admittedly dated, and very few of us these days would be so naïve as to think that the body has simply evaporated in cyberspace or that “we are all in danger of soon becoming merely ghosts in the machine.” [9] And yet, now in our pandemic present we might more fully appreciate the brunt of this electronically mediated presence as it comes to suffuse our ordinary lifeworlds. As universities, corporations, city councils, courts, and professional conferences

me looking at myself in the video chat
not hearing a word anyones saying



Another Zoom-inspired meme. One's own
electronic presence is more captivating than the
ability to connect with other people.

move online to promote social distancing, Zoom contracts our experience of many shared temporalities within the flatness of a networked present, a flatness mirrored so effortlessly in the platform's gridded interface. In this *now*, your body is no longer your own, but that of the network, legible only as an electronic presence. Who among us hasn't simply stared at their own uncanny reflection in the grid, mesmerized by our digital apparition?

To trace the contours of this electronic presence, consider here two stock photographs found on Zoom's website. In both, a man sits in a brightly lit office space, thoughtfully curling his finger around his chin as his elbow rests on a sparsely decorated white desk. He regards the monitor in front of him, upon which we find the recognizable Zoom grid in both gallery and speaker view. But while the Zoom layout changes between the images (as well as the brand of the desktop computer), the man does not. A phantom of Photoshop, he remains unaffected, seemingly a fixture of the *mise-en-scène* itself (before offices were sites for contagion).



Official stock photographs from Zoom's website. The platform, we are told, apparently works on both PC and Mac.

Here Zoom sells the fantasy of a digitally mediated presence in which real space and time are rendered obsolete. Endlessly iterative, the man is merely a proxy of a person intended to advertise Zoom's technical operation and corporate appeal. I understand this visual repetition as an index of what Kris Cohen calls the "tonelessness" of networked media, insofar as Zoom intensifies an "affectively flat or ambiguous form of mediated intimacy." [10] In the monotonous diagram of the network, electronic presence evacuates the usual coordinates of subjectivity and agency from the scene of the social, held together now by the phatic exchange of data indexing our ideas, behaviors, and emotion. Such tonelessness I argue is felt most acutely in what we have come to call Zoom fatigue, that strange vertigo one experiences when suspended in the domain of the virtual, tediously shuttling back and forth between personal and networked modes of encounter. [11]

No doubt, electronic presence poses a threat to bodily integrity by consolidating the multiplicity of temporalities that dwell in our common world to the flatness of the *now*. And yet, within the ever unfolding catastrophes of our contemporary, such presencing has come to feel more reassuring than foreboding. In this pandemic, we not only settle for electronic presence, we need it. If before the mode of electronic presence articulated by videotelephony climaxed in the crisis of the body, now it bespeaks the reconnection of the body into networks framed by crises of another kind—the pandemic and more—that index the unmooring of the social from our imagined horizons of historical movement. Disoriented and without stable footing, we engage (now more than ever!) in new forms of what Lauren Berlant terms "genre flailing" that might aid us in collectively grappling with the bewildering transformations of our world. For Berlant, the genre flail is a "social/aesthetic form in relation to the mass vulnerability lived by persons, populations, and nations." [12] It is an improvisatory mode of crisis management





The genre flail in two memes.

that attempts to recuperate the patterned set of expectations and frameworks of interpretation that enable one to emerge as a relational subject when one's sense of the present begins to fall apart. Like protesting or starting a book club or even my own writing of this essay, the genre flail gives form to the impossible and messy project of being together, if only for a moment.

As I see it, Zoom is one such contemporary (plat)form for genre flailing, promising to repair the social and recuperate what is now otherwise lost among our contemporary catastrophes. Under the moniker of electronic presence, Zoom purportedly alleviates the anxieties of disconnection (both physical and temporal) brought on by the pandemic with feelings of liveness, interactivity, and simultaneity. Here then we discover a shift in our orientation to the object of videotelephony from the dystopic anxiety of a post-cinematic datascape to some embittered, intoxicating optimism that makes our experience of Zoom so cruel. [13] In this sense, it's no surprise why so many at the beginning of lockdown noticed the uncanny relation of our world with that in E.M. Forster's 1909 "The Machine Stops." In this short story, the inhospitability of the Earth's surface forces humans to live underground in isolated rooms, only able to communicate through the Machine, a global computer system that supports instant messaging and video chat. Our very own Zoom Machine similarly alleviates the pangs of isolation in a world ravaged by disconnection (perhaps soon we too might face a planetary apocalypse of our own).



Stills from the televisual adaptation of Forster's "The Machine Stops" from *Out of the Unknown* (Season 2, Ep. 2, aired 1966).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



In the finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 12, the contestants convene through a video teleconferencing platform before the winner is announced.

While Zoom is employed ubiquitously to synchronize all sorts of relations, I argue that it is in reality television where we can more fully appreciate its promise of social repair in times of crisis. Television has long advanced a form of liveness in broadcast systems. Indeed, Jane Feuer argues that what defines television is its ontology of liveness unavailable to previous cinematic forms of exhibition.[14] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) As is the case with the real-time transmission of broadcast news reporting, we feel the world unfold simultaneous to our own sense of the present. And yet, even television couldn't cope with the devastating effects of the pandemic, as lockdown and social distancing put a halt to filming across the world. This posed a problem in particular for the genre of reality television show, which often cashes in on a feeling of liveness produced through routine production schedules, the presence of a live audience, and the spontaneity from unscripted events that only comes with people being together in the same space.

Take, for example, the season finale of *Legendary*, a reality competition web series that features eight ballroom houses vying for a \$100,000 top prize and "legendary status" in the vogue community.



The season finale of *Legendary* began with a prologue concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the show's production.

Premiering May 27, 2020 and airing through the course of June and July, the show's first season was filmed in New York City in February and March just prior to the rapid spread of COVID-19 across the United States. While most of the season was filmed as planned, the finale's taping was scheduled just prior to Phase 1 of lockdown as New York was reporting its first cases. In order to curb the spread of the virus, city officials banned gatherings of fifty or more. The producers were confronted with a tough decision: cancel the finale or film it without an audience. They chose the latter. Apparently Zoom was not yet an option. And indeed, what would a reality show filmed remotely even look like, and how would live performance translate to synchronous video teleconferencing? At the time, we had not yet experienced the ubiquitous necessity of Zoom in self-isolation to make this kind of spectatorship possible.





In the final lip synch from the finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 12, Crystal Methyd, Gigi Goode, and Jaida Essence Hall battle to "Survivor" by Destiny's Child.



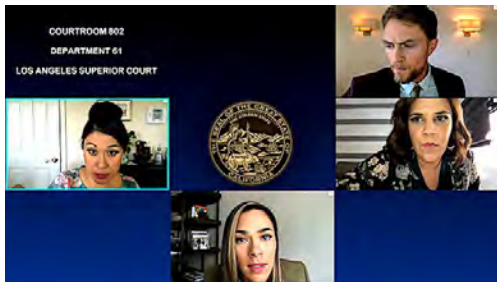
The "Zoom-union" episode of *Real Housewives of Atlanta*.



The "Zoom" parody skit from *Saturday Night Live's* "at home" edition. One of the characters accidentally changed her profile picture to a photograph of Wayne Brady.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3byTN8NTCkc>



Nene Leakes has "walked off set" by closing her laptop (revealing to the world that she has a Windows, not a Mac).



Scheduled to be filmed during the beginning of lockdown, the season finale of *All Rise* was able to be filmed as planned with Zoom and Facetime. The narrative staged a virtual courtroom, blending fiction and reality.

As the pandemic dragged on, however, reality television was quick to adopt video teleconferencing to continue production and restore the lost sense of simultaneity and spontaneity so needed by its audience. Key among such shows are the season twelve finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and its "Zoom-union" episode, and *Saturday Night Live's* "at home" editions shot from the casts' tiny NYC apartments (one episode even features a Zoom parody skit). Other kinds of televisual programs followed suit, including the 2020 Emmys award show, as well as fictional dramas and sitcoms like *All Rise*, *Connecting...*, and *Social Distance* (not to mention numerous reunion events for the casts of *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Community*, *Frasier*, *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*... and the list goes on). Calling in from their homes, the cast and crew of each show were able to go on with their work as usual, the only difference being the various spaces and times from which they arrived to the televised Zoom meeting.

Common among these examples is the conceit that Zoom's capacity for electronic presence can enable television to maintain the aesthetics of liveness specific to the medium. Importantly, the feeling of liveness in electronic presence is not the same as in older forms of televisual broadcast media through which the viewer sees the event unfold in a real-time transmission. Instead, this is a form of liveness unique to the Internet mediated in relation to what Tara McPherson terms "a *sense of causality* [...]" a sense of a connected presence in time.[15] The real-time spontaneity of the broadcast signal is replaced with the interactivity of video teleconferencing. In this case, even if an episode of reality television was filmed prior to its airing, Zoom is able to reconsolidate a feeling of liveness contingent upon its capacity to bring people together from their disparate spacetimes into the *now* of the network. The forms of sociality lost because of the pandemic were suddenly preserved, even if mediated by the screen. With Zoom, we now can return to our regularly scheduled program.

Curiously, in some cases, video teleconferencing was able to articulate a new experience of liveness in reality television otherwise unavailable to older formats of televisual production. For example, the lip sync battle in the season finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race* was arguably truer to form than any other lip sync in the show's history. While the usual lip syncs on the main stage are filmed multiple times in order to allow for the camera crew to get the best shots, this time the contestants were their own cinematographers, using digital video to live-stream a continuous performance in one take from their homes.[16] Common complaints of over-editing suddenly dissipated as we get to see the queens' talents unfiltered. Fans of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* have similarly claimed that the latest season's finale was made all the better because of Zoom, not in spite of it. Not only did the cast function as their own production crew, styling themselves and composing their own Zoom square from home to reflect their personality, the drama wasn't drawn out or staged as is often the case in previous reunions shot in person. And in fact, the platform introduced new mechanics to the reunion



The pilot episode of the Netflix original *Social Distance* features a desktop drama that took place over Zoom, Facetime, and various social media platforms.



The pilot episode of *Connecting...*, a true pandemic-era television show. The series was canceled after its first season.



The 2020 Emmys were hosted virtually. Host Jimmy Kimmel was filmed on stage while the nominees stayed home.



format, including Nene Leakes “walking off set” by closing her laptop and the host Andy Cohen muting the cast when they were starting to argue. Perhaps it is only now with this pandemic that we are beginning to more fully appreciate what our digital tools might offer in making us present to each other.

However, Zoom’s promise of social repair doesn’t come without its consequences. As much as the platform makes us feel more connected, electronic presence also elaborates a new form of pandemic-era spectatorship vexed by feelings of loneliness. Such an affective disposition seems to be the very product of the strange knots of liveness entailed in the Zoom-cum-TV image. In a reaction video showing the three finalists of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* watching themselves in the finale in real-time to discover who was victorious, the newly crowned queen Jaida Essence Hall looks around her empty living room upon winning and exclaims, “Girl, I feel so weird... this is weird!” We understand that she refers at once to the surreal dream of being America’s Next Drag Superstar, as well as to the experience of being chillingly alone in her moment of triumph (the other two finalists, the only audience to her crowning, are electronically present over Zoom). There’s no escaping the strangeness of being simultaneously present to everyone and absolutely no one in our digital networks. Girl, it is weird.

The good crisis

In her account of the braided contours of crisis, neoliberalism, and networked media, Wendy Chun argues that crisis is that which drives our attachment to networked sociality, rather than that which jeopardizes it. Networks, she writes,

“embody neoliberalism’s visions of individuals and collectively dissolving society and foster analyses that integrate individual actions/tics into shareable trends/habits.” [17]

Sedimented and reinforced through the repetition of connections, networked media make our patterns of actions and behaviors feel intentionally inclined towards change. And here it is in fact crisis—like our present pandemic and other concurrent catastrophes—that comes to “structure new media temporality.” [18] Crises introduce disruption to our habits of connection, requiring real-time decisions that force us to double down on such habits and thus make our networks more resilient. In doing so, crisis magnetizes feelings of networked sociality by fostering the illusion of user empowerment and agency. Such crises then are not exceptional to neoliberalism, but its ordinary feature, a banal mode of temporality that sustains the network’s ability to (re)connect the social.

If crisis is a necessary condition for Zoom’s promise of social repair, then how might we account for the disparate experiences of video teleconferencing during this pandemic? Moreover, for whom does Zoom provide a platform for crisis management? And whose body is endangered by the never ending *now* of electronic presence? Consider again the aforementioned stock photographs on Zoom’s website. We are told in their brand guidelines [<https://zoom.us/brandguidelines>] that official stock photography for publicity and advertising should not only reflect Zoom’s brand (“We are modern and clean while being bold and beautiful.”), but also “be as natural as possible reflect [*sic*] our culture of diversity and happiness.”

The three finalists from *RuPaul's Drag Race* watch the finale in real-time to discover the winner. Jaida Essence Hall has just been crowned America's Next Drag Superstar.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PTSqpHplF4>

Photography Best practices

All photography used throughout our marketing should reflect our brand and product. We are modern and clean while being bold and beautiful. Stock photography should be as natural as possible reflect our culture of diversity and happiness.



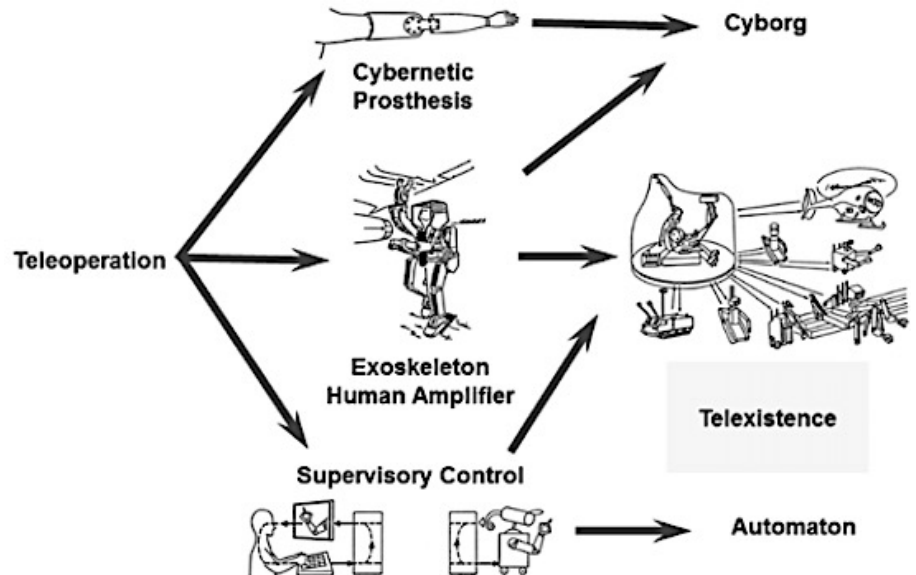
Zoom outlines best practices for their stock photography on their website.
Diversity is a core element to the brand.

One understands diversity here as a neoliberal buzzword meant to insinuate something about the inclusive demographic makeup of the company's workforce, as well as the broad applicability of the platform to consumers across axes of race, class, age, gender, religion, and more. The assortment of cheery faces in the Zoom grid suggests as much. However, if the iterability of the man from one image to the next indexes the flatness of the network and its consolidation of various spacetimes into the *now*, then here we see how this flatness is merely an illusion meant to elide the differential ways in which social becomes present to itself through video teleconferencing. In this case, the promise of social repair leveraged in this pandemic is not simply a solution to the crisis of disconnection, but also to the crisis of the social itself, always on the threshold of exceeding the form of the network.

Here we find an impasse between Zoom's promise to repair the experience of disconnection as a form of crisis management and the sublimation of that crisis within systems of neoliberal governance to uphold the structure of networked sociality. Ultimately, this impasse effaces the very real material conditions of inequity exacerbated by the pandemic, including the vast disparities in health and wellbeing experienced by intersecting minority groups, particularly in health care, housing, education, criminal justice, and finance. This inequity extends as well to the very use of video teleconferencing. While many of us are able to self-isolate in our homes, many others cannot. So-called "essential" and "frontline" workers in healthcare, postal service, warehouse management, service industries, transit operation, building maintenance, child care, and more do not have the option of using Zoom. According to a study conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics as part of their ongoing Current Population Survey, 7% of those working in accommodation and food services and 6% of those in the agricultural sector teleworked, while more than half of workers in finance, insurance, and professional and technical services worked remotely.[19] And the distribution of labor in essential positions is allotted along the usual lines of gender, race, class, education and citizenship status. The same study found that among those who had the opportunity to telework in May of this year, 59% percent had a Bachelor's degree or higher while 5% only had a high school diploma. Another study by the Center for Economic and Policy Research concluded that frontline labor was disproportionately composed of women (nearly two-thirds), while people of color and immigrants were overrepresented across labor sectors, especially in building maintenance, cleaning services, child care, transit, grocery and warehouses, and postal services.[20] To be sure, the incubation of COVID-19 within the national body has only exacerbated the corruption, greed, and atrophy of a political system that has long failed many minority groups at a time when white supremacy and

ecological ruin have become prosaic tropes of existence. Some among us have long lived in crisis, which has appeared less as a singular event, than some diffuse atmospheric weight.

Now, one might argue that of course some jobs just simply can't be accommodated with telework; how could one bartend or style hair over Zoom? But the issue arises not so much in terms of what forms of labor are amenable to telework, but rather how video teleconferencing has long accelerated unequal relations in national and global political economies. Indeed, for many, electronic presence is not a solution to disconnection, but its bedfellow. We would be wise to remember how the global North has at least since the 1970s subcontracted much of its telework (especially software development) to countries promising lower-waged labor in order to expedite the ascendancy of the neoliberal market in the metropole. In our present moment, mandates around social distancing have spurred a longstanding interest in telepresence for creating new circuits of remote on-demand labor. Consider here the Model-T from the Japanese firm Telexistence—a system that allows laborers to don a VR headset and controllers to complete a selected task from an online marketplace. This technology has been in development since the mid-twentieth century but now billed as especially useful in the pandemic.[21]



A diagram detailing the evolution of the Telexistence technology as compared to other cybernetic technologies.

Source: <https://tachilab.org/en/about/telexistence.html>



In a video [<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-54232563>] published by BBC, a laborer demonstrates the use of Telexistence for controlling a robot in a convenience store to comply with social distancing mandates.

Or consider how video teleconferencing platforms are being used to solve certain problems only when such solutions are understood to be morally obligated or at least lucrative. In Massachusetts, for example, medical providers have wanted to use Zoom to see patients remotely for many years, but state legislation did not require Medicaid to cover the costs of telemedicine visits, and so such visits were limited.[22] Following the failure to approve telehealth parity legislation in 2018, it is only recently that the state's Board of Registration in Medicine has approved its first permanent policy on telemedicine, finally allowing patients to get access to affordable remote healthcare under the most dire of circumstances.[23]

And no doubt, this pandemic is but a testing ground for refining future technologies of electronic presence to continue outsourcing telework in ways that restrict some from gaining access to the material and symbolic benefits of citizenship. Filmmaker Alex Rivera offers one such speculative future in his 1997

experimental short *Why Cybraceros?* and subsequent narrative feature *Sleep Dealer* (2008).



A laborer from Mexico controls a robot in the United States in Alex Rivera's *Why Cybraceros?* (1997). Translated to English, the Spanish-language voiceover states: "Using a series of simple commands, a Mexican worker can, from Mexico, watch their live internet feed, decide what fruit is ripe, what branch needs pruning, and what bush needs watering." Watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xr1eqKcDZq4>

In these sci-fi worlds, certain labor contexts previously thought to be immune from telework (e.g. agriculture and construction) espouse real-time video streaming, augmented haptic interfaces, and biometrically integrated heads-up displays to enable American corporations to import labor from Mexico without physically bringing the laborer's body across the border.



A laborer from Mexico equips himself to control a robot on a construction site in the United States in Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008).

Such real and speculative technologies—Zoom’s ancestry and heirs—make plain the striated circuits of power that animate telework within the American imaginary beyond its contemporary appeals to social repair. Electronic presence thus is not simply defined by the technics of liveness and simultaneity within in a networked temporality, but instead is bound up with the racialized and gendered arrangements of technological surrogacy that bracket the limits of human autonomy and freedom within a post-racial neoliberal order.[24] Indeed, liveness is not a technical condition of the network itself, but is, as Tung-Hui Hu remarks, “something that can be, and increasingly is, purchased from lower-wage microworkers elsewhere.”[25] Hu continues here even more forcefully, observing how electronic presence—and attendant concepts of liveness, spontaneity, and interactivity—draws its strength from what Sianne Ngai calls the “animatedness” of racial difference.[26] As a relational difference embedded in networked form, racial-class dramas continually serve as boundary cases that demarcate the viability of electronic presence for the political and economic demands of remoteness in times of crisis. Whatever fantasies of cohesion we attribute to electronic presence can only be sustained insofar as the premiere subject of video telephony is decidedly unmarked by racial, gendered, and class-based differences. I argue thus that at stake in our reckoning with Zoom is an understanding of social difference as that unruly vector which sustains the technics of electronic presence and whatever fantasies of togetherness it imagines to be possible. Perhaps then all this talk of crisis eclipses how the very genres of connectivity that sustain feelings of networked belonging have long been broken[27]—and perhaps for some, were never there.

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We could have

If the temporality of the present fails to register how the promise of social repair is distributed along sociopolitical boundaries, in the remainder of this essay I seek to locate an alternative tense that brackets the differential ways in which video teleconferencing attenuates the social in our current historical juncture. To do so, let's return to the beginning. In the very early phases of the pandemic in the United States, even prior to the federal declaration of COVID-19 as a national emergency or the installment of statewide stay-at-home orders, Zoom CEO Eric Yuan remarked on an earnings call that the novel coronavirus will no doubt "transform the landscape" of work to accommodate a fully remote (or at least hybrid) model.[28] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Not long after, both Square and Twitter announced in May 2020 that employees who can work from home may do so permanently even after offices reopen. Curiously, however, as much as he speculates on the future, Yuan also suggests in this call that video teleconferencing finds its relevance in the past. Identifying several peer companies like InVision, Zapier, and Gitlab which have all long functioned without an office space, he jests:

"If I started over with the company, I'm not going to have a single physical office. A lot of people asked me 'are you crazy?' They realize that's reality now." [29]

While Yuan is specifically remarking on the organization of labor in his company, one can sense here that he is also talking about what Zoom makes possible as a corrective to previous configurations of the workplace. No doubt, platforms like Zoom, Slack, and Microsoft Teams have always had the potential to allow for remote configurations of work and leisure, but have only now become that "reality."

Following this rhetorical lead, one wonders how much video teleconferencing could have impacted our daily lives before they were abruptly altered by the pandemic. To be sure, we could have always worked remotely, but we did not. We could have always connected with family and friends in other cities or countries, but we did not. We could have always attended fitness classes, community gatherings, therapy sessions, and concerts remotely prior to this pandemic, but we did not. We could have, and we didn't, but with Zoom now we can!

Common to these refrains is the *could have*: a recognition of a lost past that arrives now too late. The particular tense of this verb phrase is known as the past conditional. Sometimes referred to as modals of missed opportunity, the past conditional is typically used to describe the possibility of something not having happened in the past at the time of speaking. To be sure, the past conditional does not signify a simple statement of fact, but instead it explores the boundaries of a hypothetical situation and one's relation to it. In grammatical terms, the past conditional is subjunctive (as opposed to indicative) insofar as it expresses a subject's attitude towards a particular object (like video teleconferencing)—be that in the form of a wish, doubt, opinion, or judgment. At the risk of stating the obvious, I don't mean to suggest that Zoom enables some sort of time travel, allowing us to commune with the past or vice versa; the platform will always concern the intensification of simultaneity and liveness within the present. Rather, I propose that the past conditional contracts something central about the

way Zoom enters into our contemporary crises armed with a promise of social repair. Conjugated in the past conditional, video teleconferencing appears now as a solution to a problem only perceived in retrospect, a failed potential fully realized in the midst of crisis.

Moreover, I argue that the past conditional enables us to better witness how the unruly vector of social difference props up attachments to electronic presence bracketed by the unhappy architectures of neoliberalism. Note here how the past conditional rhetorically implies the presence of a *we* as the subject of Zoom's promise. Again: "*We could have, but we did not.*" By expressing a time of reference in relation to a moment of speaking, the past conditional shores up a subject—the *we*—that otherwise goes unmarked in the present (recall the stock photographs where there is apparently no subject, only the tiresome tonelessness of the network). Stated differently, the past conditional brings forth the relational difference of electronic presence: the *could have* demands a *we* for whom Zoom can recuperate the forms of intimacy otherwise lost due to the pandemic.

Key to the configuration of this *we* is the staging of a dialectic between potential and capacity.[30] In speculating on a hypothetical prior, the past conditional opens up a chasm between what Zoom *could do* as a platform for video telephony and *can do now* within certain historical conditions. The potential for remote connection was always there, but its capacity for social repair was only fully realized within the crucible of COVID-19. Here we note that while the potential of electronic presence is amodal (and thus politically flexible), its capacity for social repair takes on the mode of crisis management when activated as a reflex of neoliberal governance. In this sense, the transformation of potential into capacity is not always felt to be necessitated by crisis, but instead as an artifact of individual agency. Borrowing again from McPherson, we might phrase such agency as a "volitional mobility" that yokes electronic presence to feelings of choice, access, and personalization.[31] As the *we* who only realizes too late the power of electronic presence, the good neoliberal subject resolves the formerly failed potential of Zoom into a new use-value of unending connection.

But the past conditional seems to pose a deadlock. Is the potential of electronic presence always bound to the neoliberal syntax of crisis, forever affixed in its capacity to reconnect that which has been shattered? What other pasts and futures are effaced when *we* go on bemoaning the failure of not having used Zoom this way before? On the other hand, then, I maintain that even as the past conditional invokes a *we* that bears witness to a scene of loss, it also opens up a speculative encounter with otherwise submerged potentialities of electronic presence. Such is the operation of the subjunctive mood in the past conditional: to explore the unreality of the past and its bearing on the present. Following science fiction author Samuel Delany, I propose to consider how the past conditional refracts the subjunctivity of Zoom. As he writes, "subjunctivity is the tension on the thread of meaning" that informs the relational disposition of a given word series.[32] Subjunctivity describes how the form of representation within a set of statements relates to a given reality.

Importantly, subjunctivity doesn't simply point to the irrational or the imaginary, but instead operates upon what Sun-Ha Hong terms a "positional plasticity" that "transpos[es] subject positions across different space/time and alternative possibilities." [33] In doing so, subjunctivity dilates how objects (like video teleconferencing) move in and out of various orientations to the historical present in ways that interrogate what we take to be the shared temporality of networked form. Hong continues, pointing out the dual nature of subjunctivity:

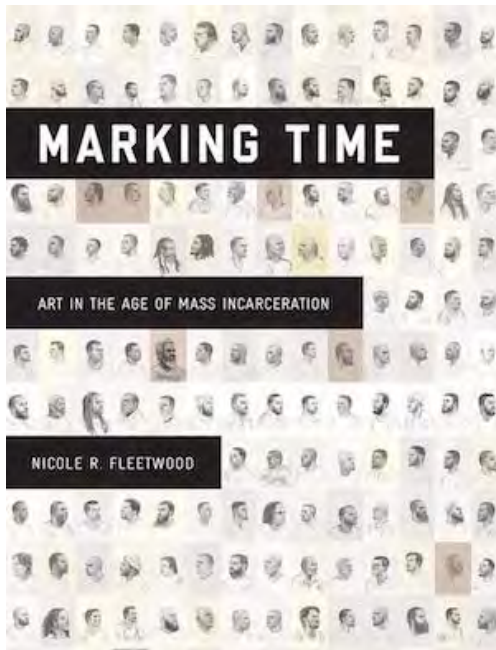
"subjunctivity habituates subjects into the manifold connections between speculations about the explicitly uncertain and nonactual, on the one hand, and the operationalization of knowledge—that is, turning known and certainties into judgment and action—on the

other.”[34]

Here we locate the Janus-faced nature of electronic presence as a subjunctive construction in the past conditional. While the past conditional articulates how electronic presence is incorporated into the neoliberal demands of crisis management to reaffirm our experience of the present, at the same time it gestures towards speculative trajectories of pasts that very well could have happened and the futures that they inspire. In what follows, I turn to another scene of the screen that allows us to glimpse Zoom in the past conditional and the polarity of the platform’s subjunctive construction.

An inside that is also outside

On April 28, 2020, MoMA PS1 hosted a virtual book launch [<https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/6664>] for Nicole Fleetwood’s monograph *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, published by Harvard University Press.

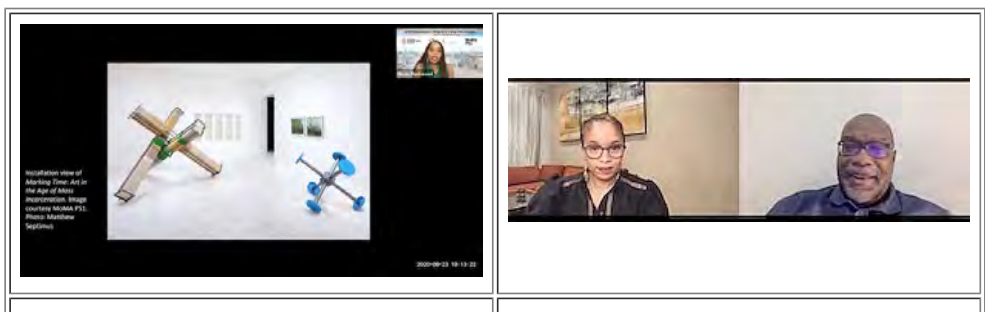


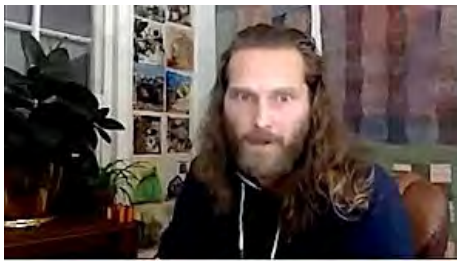

The book cover for *Marking Time* published by Harvard University Press.



A screenshot from the opening moments of Nicole Fleetwood’s book launch hosted by MoMA PS1. Nicole Fleetwood is in the first square in the second row.

The book launch, which was conducted through Zoom and now archived online [<https://vimeo.com/416021133>], was coordinated in tandem with the opening of the eponymously titled exhibition curated by Fleetwood at PS1. The event itself featured Fleetwood in conversation with scholar Fred Moten as well as several artists, activists, and community organizers, including Jesse Krimes and Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter. Fleetwood, from her tiny Zoom square, first describes the book project and then invites her fellow panelists to reflect on the ways in which artists transform what she calls “penal matter” into “art that often violates written and unwritten prison codes and regulations.”[35] The conversation further tracks how art participates within movements for prison abolition and how community organizing offers space to resist the violences of the carceral state.



| | |
|---|---|
| <p>A screenshot of Fleetwood delivering a lecture for the Atlanta University Center Art History + Curatorial Studies Collective in September 2020 about her book and accompanying exhibition. On the slide is an installation photograph from PS1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p57IWbECBY</p> | <p>Fleetwood in conversation with Fred Moten during the book launch.</p> |
|  |  |
| <p>Formerly incarcerated artist Jesse Krimes discusses the way that art-making fosters forms of visibility and community within the carceral system.</p> | <p>Artist and musician Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter, also known as “Isis Tha Saviour,” discusses <i>Ain’t I a Woman</i>, an autobiographical film about incarceration, motherhood, and reproductive justice.</p> |

In many ways, this book launch exemplifies how Zoom’s capacity for connection emerges quite powerfully as a solution to a problem only now exposed in retrospect. While the exhibit itself was closed due to the onset of the pandemic (it has since reopened through April 4, 2021), the book launch, which might have been held physically at the museum, migrated to Zoom. As is the case with so many events over the past year, Zoom provides a pretense of normalcy, allowing the world to go on as it had before. But perhaps what’s at stake here is less how to reconnect people during the pandemic than how to reconcile with the failure of not doing so before. Phrased in the past conditional, this event *could have* always been open to a virtual public, but with Zoom now it is. In fact, with all the benefits of hosting the event online, one is left to wonder why we never used video conferencing like this before. From the perspective of PS1, the museum saved funds that would have otherwise been allocated to travel, accommodations, refreshments, and building maintenance. And for those who participated in the event as panelists or audience members, Zoom enabled simultaneous communication from varying global times zones. Here we see plainly how presencing make its ascendance as the premiere temporality of networked experience in moments of crisis. By swiftly resolving the potential of electronic presence into the mode of social repair, Zoom conjures a *we* that sees in this book launch a future for how to go on being together in time.

But at one point, things go out of sync. During the Q&A portion, we see the moderator unmuting audience members one by one to speak to the panelists. At 1:16:00, the moderator announces that there is time for only one more question and unmutes someone who Fleetwood introduces as Pastor Isaac Scott, founder of The Confined Arts. After describing his organization and where to find Fleetwood’s description of it in her book, Scott explains that he in fact doesn’t have a question for the panel, but instead wants to turn over his time to artist Kenny Reams “because he’s inside.” [36] Currently incarcerated in Arkansas, Reams attends the book launch through a private call with Scott set on speaker phone. At first we only hear his voice coming off frame, but eventually he comes into view in the webcam as Scott raises his cellphone to the studio microphone that is hooked up to his computer. This is quite the complicated set-up for a platform that professes to streamline communication into a single channel for live video teleconferencing.



A screenshot from the Q&A portion. Pastor Isaac Scott has just been unmuted and is introduced by Fleetwood. He is in first square in the third row.



Pastor Scott holds up his phone revealing that Kenny Reams is also virtually present at the book launch.

What I find so compelling about this particular moment from the book launch is that we might glimpse in Ream's attempt to be present the refrain of the past conditional. Because Zoom supports audio conferencing in those events when participants don't have a laptop or smartphone (imagine that!), Reams technically *could have* called in to connect directly to the networked meeting taking place, but he did not; and there are perhaps many reasons he did not. We can only speculate as to what systems of power might have prevented him from getting access a device that supports Zoom, what forms of institutional exclusion (both from the prison and the museum) might have prevented those who are currently incarcerated from being included on the panel, and how the pandemic (which assaulted prisons and detention centers across the nation in an extraordinary way) might have impacted his ability to attend the event in full.[37] Thus, unlike Scott, Fleetwood, or any of the other panelists or audience members, Reams seemingly arrives to this event from another time and place, beyond the network, from an inside that it also outside. There is no video feed, no way to chat with him, include him in breakout rooms, send files or flash a thumbs up emoji. His voice is muted, glitchy, and canned: a result of room echo and sonic feedback, and perhaps too of Zoom's automated background noise reduction feature. He tells us

that he wasn't aware he was going to have the opportunity to speak; perhaps he was in attendance the whole time, listening in over speaker phone, the sound of Fleetwood's voice arriving as muted, glitchy, and canned on the other end.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

When I first encountered this moment from Fleetwood's book launch, I was reminded of the opening scene from Audre Lorde's famous essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In it, Lorde recounts her experience presenting at a conference in 1979 held by New York University's Institute for the Humanities where she was invited to deliver a paper on the treatment of race, sexuality, class and age within feminist politics. However, to her chagrin (but perhaps not to her surprise), she notices upon her arrival that her presence there is only token as best. Not only is she restricted to talking on the only panel devoted to race, but she's only one of two black women in attendance, both of whom are invited on the supposition of their discussing race in feminist politics. Taking stock of these failures, Lorde bemoans the utter lack of representation from "poor women, Black and Third world women, and lesbians" in feminist politics, as well as the institutional barriers that have prevented access to these conversations. [38] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



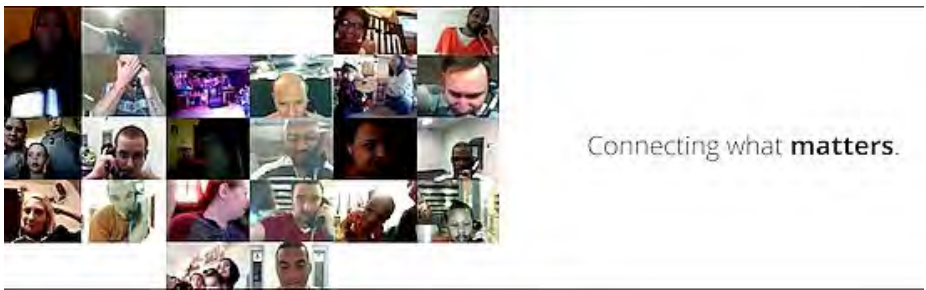
The reason I'm reminded of Lorde's essay when watching back this scene from PS1's book launch is that I hear in her complaint the past conditional at work: we *could have* always included a diverse coalition of women in conferences to speak about feminist discourse, but we did not. For Lorde, the past conditional calls attention to the forms of institutional power that continually exclude marginalized women from conversations about racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia, as well as continually erect barriers that prevent such voices from being heard. Reading this again now among our manifold crises, one is left to wonder if Zoom would make this any different. Perhaps the PS1 book launch is case in point—or for that matter, any of the plethora of panels, fora, conferences, lectures, symposia, workshops, and institutes that migrated online since the onset of the pandemic. Just as we always *could have* conducted events like this virtually before, we very well *could have* included marginalized persons—the incarcerated, the poor, the sick, the queer, the homeless, the exiled, and the immigrant—into *our* conversations, especially now that everything is online. But given how little seems to have changed, perhaps the promise of electronic presence won't change any of that. The Master has a Zoom account.

Indeed, when considered in the context of policing and prisons, videotelephony's promise of social repair becomes wedded to what Stephen Dillon calls the "temporality of violence" maneuvered by the neoliberal carceral state in which

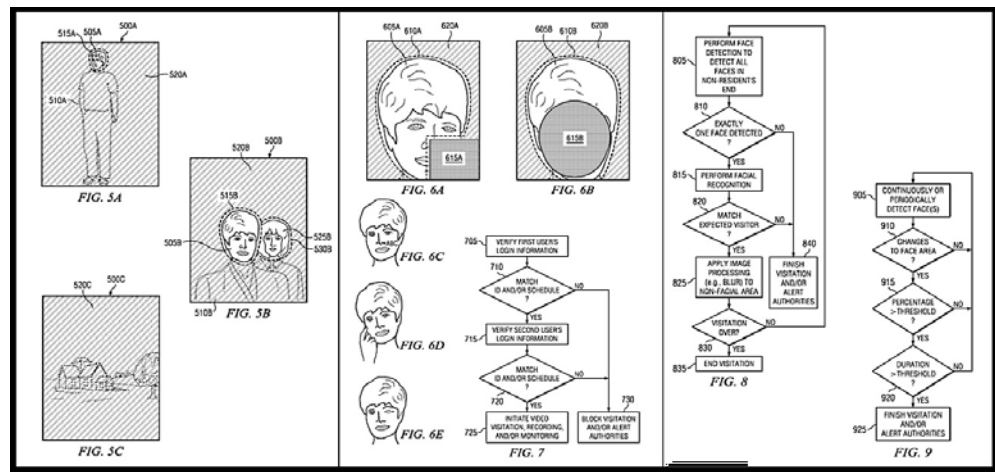
"the racial violence of law and order and the governance of the market [are] naturalized through their attachment to the temporality of progress." [39]

Under this banner of progress, videotelephony too easily becomes a tool for the exercise of state power. In a meeting with investors in June 2020, Eric Yuan remarked that while end-to-end encryption will be made available for corporate clients, free calls from the public will not be protected so as to allow law enforcement the ability to identify those who "use Zoom for a bad purpose." [40] Before that, we find the carceral logics of electronic presence in the form of video visitation technologies, introduced in the mid-1990s and ultimately reaching a "critical mass" in 2014. [41] During this time, private companies like Securus and JPay—two of the leading corrections-focused tech companies—sold video visitation to prisons, government officials, and the public as a cheap and safe alternative to in-person visits that can help keep families together despite the distance introduced by incarceration, which might ultimately reduce sentencing

times and the possibility of recidivism. A commercial from Securus shows incarcerated persons calling their families to celebrate birthdays and holidays, emphasizing how video visitation technologies are “connecting what matters.”

| | |
|--|--|
|  |  <p>Video Visitation</p> <p>Talk face-to-face from the comfort of your home at a time that's convenient for you.</p> <p>Learn More</p> |
| <p>Securus stations at the Jackson County Detention Center, Missouri.</p> | <p>Another stock photograph of video telephony, this time from the log in page for JPay.</p> |
|  <p>Connecting what matters.</p> | |
| <p>In a commercial [https://vimeo.com/257002067] on their website, Securus claims that what makes their video visitation services unique is the ability to connect families.</p> | |

And yet, as Patrice Fulcher argues, this promise of social repair is a “double-edged sword.”[42] Unlike Zoom, Skype, or Facetime which are free, video visitation can often cost over one dollar per minute (with some companies like TelMate and TurnKey Corrections requiring additional fees), thus gouging income from families of incarcerated persons. Families too have continually complained that video visitation services are rife with connection issues, grainy images, and poor audio quality.[43] Moreover, the use of video telephony has only exacerbated the surveillance of incarcerated persons as nearly all prisons in the U.S. record the phone and video calls of inmates. This process reflects a broader pattern of “prison media work” in which inmates are tracked to produce data (for example, voice recordings) that is subsequently collected and used to train machine learning and AI systems, like predictive policing programs.[44] Some companies like Securus are even integrating facial recognition systems into their video sessions to analyze and identify participants.[45] What this history of video visitation reveals is not only that electronic presence has always failed those marginal to institutionalized networks of communication, but also how it continually reifies in our current pandemic certain sociopolitical barriers that keep some in the network and others outside of it.



In a patent filed in 2012, Securus outlines a facial recognition system that can identify participants in video visitation sessions for security purposes. [\[Click here to see image full size\]](#)

However, as a subjunctive construction, might the past conditional allow for a reading of video teleconferencing that moves beyond the recuperative drive of social repair to some other submerged potential of electronic presence? Such is the case for Lorde who doesn't resign herself to bemoaning a missed opportunity at the conference, but instead draws on her experience to offer a clarion call for change:

"Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies the security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being." [46]

Following Lorde, we might consider how the past conditional offers a mode of speculative insurgency that mobilizes the past to imagine beyond the stultifying effects of the present towards some other configuration of our world. To be sure, black feminist writers have long employed the past conditional to posit what Regis Mann refers to as a "vestibular site" for alternative readings of temporality, one that aims to transform the *what might have been* into the *might still be*. [47] Similarly, Lisa Lowe considers how "the past conditional temporality symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss." [48] Such a framework might aid in addressing the forms of historical amnesia that have sedimented within sites of institutional power, as well as steward neglected epistemologies for constructing decolonial futures of equity and justice.



A sign at a Black Lives Matter protest near the White House on June 1. Photographed by Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

We see such insurgent force of the past conditional in a sign like this one, photographed on June 1 in a Black Lives Matter protest near the White House over the murder of George Floyd, as well as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Nina Pop, and countless others. "It could have been my son," and it could still be another person's son, the sign seems to warn, if the conditions of this present don't change. In the crisis of anti-Black violence, the past conditional is mobilized as a call to action to abolish carceral forms of governance, as well as to imagine Black life in the tense of what Tina Campt refers to as the "future real conditional" or "the performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must." [49] Importantly, for Campt, futurity is not a hymn for hope; there is no false promise of repair. Rather, this tense reflects "an attachment to a belief in what should be true, which impels us to realize that aspiration." [50] In much the same way, we see in this protest sign how the past conditional is a means to insist on a time otherwise, one that doesn't ossify the lost past into some promised future framed by crisis, but stays with that scene of loss as a speculative ethics for

past and future freedoms.

By recalling Lorde's essay here and other writers on the past conditional, my aim is to resist a certain kind of reading of the scene I have excerpted from the PS1 book launch. It might seem enticing, for example, to consider how the *could have* that frames Reams' failure to be included in Zoom's network somehow articulates a political refusal of the platform's neoliberal agenda or an indictment of the forms of absence that electronic presence inflicts upon those targeted by carceral forms of governance. However, in constituting this fairly quotidian moment as an object for close-reading, I recognize the danger that such frameworks pose for racialized subjects who are continually "bound to appear" within dominant visual systems as a structural invisibility or oppositional presence to a stated norm.[51] To be sure, Reams is decidedly not resisting anything; he's simply showing up to congratulate his friend and colleague, share his story of incarceration, and engage in conversation about the value of art in abolition movements. I keep thinking here that what we see Isaac Scott and Kenny Reams doing (calling on speaker phone and holding that phone up to the computer, rather than using Zoom) limns the elusive and opaque systems of connection that have long been in place for those constrained within systems of domination. To be sure, those most neglected by the state—the poor, the incarcerated, the immigrant, as well as racial, ethnic, and gendered minorities—*have always* improvised systems of contact to make the feeling of remoteness more bearable, a feeling sensed long before the pandemic made it painfully quotidian for those seeking new tools for crisis management. Such opaque systems of connection are less attempts to recuperate something lost in exceptional times of crisis, but instead quiet efforts to be together when being together is made all but impossible.

Thus, rather than speak on behalf of those outside the network, I conclude by addressing the we assembled by the past conditional—including me and many of you reading this, maybe between Zoom meetings—and how this framework might better tend to those relations of sociopolitical difference that frame our experience of electronic presence. In opposition to other temporal forms like the present or presencing, the past conditional mode, especially as received from black feminist thought, helps us glimpse how our fantasies of togetherness, of inhabiting a shared temporality, are sustained by the unruliness of a time otherwise that arrives in its precise dislocation from networked forms. Put differently, those outside the network continually serve as limit cases for what we take to be the failure of electronic presence and how it might function now in times of crisis with a promise of social repair. Whatever failure we might attribute to electronic presence is only felt in the wake of such crises by those for whom the demands of labor, intimacy, and capital were always but inconveniences at best. Here then we might understand Zoom fatigue less as a symptom of the technical form of networked media, than as the mood of a white liberal public and its compensatory attachment to electronic presence in self-isolation. What this means for that we invoked by the past conditional is a recognition that presencing is less a promise of repair than an opportunity to slow down our habits of connection, to conjugate a different tense that better dilates the very systems of power and historical amnesia that have made our networks possible.

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Notes

1. According to an article [<https://www.businessinsider.com/meet-zoom-billionaire-eric-yuan-career-net-worth-life>] published by Business Insider, Eric Yuan, CEO of Zoom Technologies Inc., grossed over \$12 billion since the start of lockdown in March and now ranks among the 400 richest people in the United States. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. Ubiquity is a contested term for many reasons, notwithstanding the apparent universalism embedded in our perception of Zoom's success during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this essay, when I speak of "ubiquity," I do so as it relates to the aesthetic configuration of always-on computing and digital networked media. However, I also recognize the need to provincialize Zoom as a uniquely American software company that finds most of its clientele in American business, universities, hospitals, courts, and homes.
3. McKenzie Wark, *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture, and Class* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 30. Wark provides a more robust definition of telesthesia: "Perception at a distance, as in the telescope, telegraph, telephone, television, or telecommunications in general. Its key quality is to bring what is distant near, or make what is distant a site of action. It is a property of a class of vectors that have the quality of making information move faster than people or things, thus opening up the terrain of third nature as a terrain of command and control, and eventually of a game space" (205). Importantly, while telesthesia has been around since at least the invention of the telegraph, Wark argues that it culminated in the late 1970s as a key component of postmodern culture and its "temporal symptoms," in particular the abstracting vectoral effects of cyberspace (340).
4. Manuel Castells, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban-Regional Process* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
5. Video teleconferencing is a subgenre of video telephony. Video telephony here refers to the transmission and reception of audio-visual signals in real-time, giving rise to what we call telepresence. The history of video telephony is expansive, including close-circuit television, video telephone booths, videophones, camera enabled mobile phones, and more. Among such devices, we also find video teleconferencing, which implies the use of video telephony for groups or organizational contexts, rather than individual communication. In this case, video teleconferencing can be considered a specific configuration of telepresence, rather than emerging from a particular technology or platform (like Zoom).
6. Here I refer to Lisa Gitelman's crucial observation that the "new"-ness of media says less about the media in question than about "the ways that people experience meaning, how they perceive the world and communicate with each other, and how they distinguish the past and identify culture." Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 1. See also Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelman, "What's New About New Media?"

in *New Media, 1740-1915*, ed. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), xi-xxii.

7. Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence,'" in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, ed. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016), <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/2-1-sobchack>. This essay was originally published as "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence'" in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 83-106. It was subsequently republished in Sobchack's monograph *Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

8. Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen," <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/2-1-sobchack>. For Sobchack, digital technologies transforms our experience of time, which is now less an objective configuration within the photographic image than it is "constituted and lived paradoxically as a *homogeneous experience of discontinuity*" within networked media. She continues, particularly attuned to how this experience of time produces a new form of embodiment: "Indeed, the electronic is phenomenologically experienced not as a discrete, intentional, body-centered mediation and projection in space but rather as a simultaneous, dispersed, and insubstantial transmission across a network or web that is constituted spatially more as a materially flimsy latticework of nodal points than as the stable ground of embodied experience."

9. Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen," <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/2-1-sobchack>.

10. Kris Cohen, *Never Alone, Except for Now: Art, Networks, Populations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 99. Cohen elaborates upon the tonelessness of networked spaces as emerging from "their parallelistic relation to intentionality, to sovereign forms of subjectivity, self-development, and world building" (102). Cohen catalogues this tonelessness in the profusion of emojis and acronyms like LOL that mark the ordinary sphere of communication in networked life, diacritics that attempt to insert an affective inflection into the otherwise neutral or flat tone of networked space.

11. As Geert Lovink writes, "Zoom fatigue arises because it is so directly related to the 'bullshit job' reality of our office existences. What is supposed to be personal, turns out to be social. What is supposed to be social, turns out to be formal, boring and (most likely) unnecessary. This is only felt on those rare occasions when we experience flashes of exceptional intellectual insight and when existential vitality bursts through established technological boundaries." Geert Lovink, "The anatomy of Zoom fatigue," *Eurozine*, Nov. 2, 2020. <https://www.eurozine.com/the-anatomy-of-zoom-fatigue>.

12. Lauren Berlant, "Genre Flailing," *Capacious* 1.2 (2018): 156-162. <http://capaciousjournal.com/article/genre-flailing>.

13. I riff here again off Berlant and her famous formulation of "cruel optimism" as the "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility" (24). Importantly, for Berlant, cruel optimism is a structure of feeling common to postwar neoliberal governance that describes one's attachment to particular objects when seeking the fantasy of the good life even when such objects prove injurious or debilitating.

14. Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches, An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: AFI, 1983), 12-21. [[return to page 2](#)]

15. Tara McPherson, "Liveness, Mobility, and the Web," in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 202.

16. In many ways, the move towards livestreaming has also reflected a broader development in drag performance since the start of lockdown. As bars and clubs began to shut their doors, drag performers took to online venues (like Instagram, TikTok, Twitch, YouTube, and more) to present their work. Interestingly, if before drag was primarily a mode of live performance for an audience, now many of these digital drag shows resemble the music video genre, in which drag performers lip sync and dance to a song with various kind of staging, costume, make up, and choreography, all of which is shot and edited before the airing of the performance itself online. While digital drag performance indeed loses out on much of the spontaneity and improvisatory nature of live drag performance in the club, it benefits in many other ways, including: handing over complete control to the drag performer as to how their image will circulate, enabling drag performers to have greater selection of the kind of material they might choose to perform, gaining access to a national and international audience, and integrating cinematography into their performance. If the pandemic posed a threat to art forms like drag, then such a threat was only perceived in the loss of previous way of doing things; electronic presence could make so much more possible. Of course, the benefits of electronic presence are exceedingly experienced only by a select number of drag performers, particularly those successful on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, who enjoy the kind of celebrity and platform to practice more entrepreneurial styles of online engagement.

17. Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 39.

18. Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, 73.

19. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Supplemental data measuring the effects of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the labor market," Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Study, updated Nov. 6, 2020. <https://www.bls.gov/cps/effects-of-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic.htm>.

20. Hye Jin Rho, Hayley Brown, Shawn Fremstad, "A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries," Center for Economic Policy and Research, April 2020. <https://cepr.net/a-basic-demographic-profile-of-workers-in-frontline-industries>.

21. For a detailed history of the Telexistence technology, see the website [<https://tachilab.org/en/about/telexistence.html>] for Tachi Labs at the University of Tokyo.

22. Erin Horan, "Virtual visits: How telemedicine can improve health care," Boston Children's Hospital's Clinical Health Blog, Aug 11, 2015. <https://notes.childrenshospital.org/virtual-visits-how-telemedicine-can-improve-health-care>. Nathaniel Lacktman, "Massachusetts Telehealth Legislation Paves Way for Sweeping Changes," Foley & Lardner LLP, July 24, 2018. <https://mhealthintelligence.com/news/after-past-failures-2-states-push-ahead-with-new-telehealth-rules>.

23. Eric Wicklund, "After Past Failures, 2 States Push Ahead With New Telehealth Rules," mHealth Intelligence, July 2, 2020. <https://mhealthintelligence.com/news/after-past-failures-2-states-push-ahead-with-new-telehealth-rules>.

24. For an historical account of technological surrogacy and its relation to colonial

diagrams of power, see Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (Durham: Duke, 2019).

25. Tung-Hui Hu, "Laugh Out Loud," in *Assembly Codes: The Logistics of Media*, ed. Matthew Hockenberry, Nicole Starosielski, and Susan Zieger (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

26. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press), 91.

27. I draw here from Kris Cohen who argues that endemic to networked form is the "broken genre," a new norm of sociality marked by "intimacy without reciprocity." Similarly in the vein of Berlant's writing on the genre as a form of social contract—a loose affective exchange that informs an aesthetic transaction—Cohen conceives of networks as social platforms built on the uneven distribution of intimacies "governed by the algorithmic logic of competition." In networks, speech, action, and agency are mediated as data, capital, and vectors of movement, never meant to be reciprocated in kind. For Cohen, the broken genre of networked form is thus evidence that the internet's democratic ideal of communication is but a fantasy compensating for the very absence of the network's technical potential for reciprocal exchange. Cohen, *Never Alone, Except for Now*, 42-44.

28. Nat Levy, "Zoom CEO: Coronavirus outbreak will 'change the landscape' of work and communication," *GeekWire*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.geekwire.com/2020/zoom-ceo-coronavirus-outbreak-will-change-landscape-work-communication>. [return to page 3]

29. Nat Levy, "Zoom CEO," <https://www.geekwire.com/2020/zoom-ceo-coronavirus-outbreak-will-change-landscape-work-communication>.

30. The past conditional is typically considered to imply that a prior condition has yet been unfulfilled, but can very well be so in the present given certain circumstances. However, philosopher M.R. Ayers has argued that such is not always the case. In most cases in ordinary language, the "could have" of the past conditional rather gestures towards the hypothetical potential of such event and its actualization in the present. As he writes, "The force of the subjunctive is not to *assert* that the antecedent is unfilled, although the mood does in effect *hint* that this is so. [...] It is rather simply to imply that the power, ability, possibility, capacity or potentiality in question is not, or was not, or will not be exercised or actualized" (118-119). Moreover, it is counter-productive to assess the subjunctive conditional simply in terms of it being actualized or not, when its rhetorical force lies in the speculative intonation. Perhaps here is where we might locate the error of crisis management, insofar as it forces the subjunctive to actualize a potential implication when the past conditional (in a case like "We could have always used Zoom...") was never intended to do so. M. R. Ayers, "Austin on 'Could' and 'Could Have,'" *The Philosophical Quarterly* (1950-) 16.63 (1966): 113-120.

31. McPherson, "Liveness, Mobility, and the Web," 202.

32. Samuel Delany, "About 5,750 Words," in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009 [1978]), 10. Delany tracks subjunctivity through various genres of writing, including naturalistic fiction, reportage, fantasy, and science fiction. In this schema, the "could have" is unique to naturalistic fiction insofar as the events described are in the realm of possibility in this world, but did not occur in the past tense. Relatedly, science fiction narratives describe "events which have not happened," including events that might happen, will not happen, have not happened yet, and have not happened in the past.

33. Sun-Ha Hong, *Technologies of Speculation: The Limits of Knowledge in a Data-Driven Society* (New York: NYU Press, 2020), 117. As Hong notes, subjunctivity is also a prime technical component of contemporary big data programs insofar as predictive analytics operationalize the gap between the unknown and a calculated judgment. And yet, despite the potential for use in surveillance systems “subjunctivity often produces gray areas for bestowing speculative and hypothetical reasoning with a disavowed form of veridical authority” (118).
34. Hong, *Technologies of Speculation*, 118-119.
35. Nicole Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 58.
36. For more information on the Confined Arts, see their website: <http://www.theconfinedarts.org>. And if you are interested in learning more about Kenny Reams and his story, visit <https://freekennethreams.org>.
37. The Marshall Project, “A State-by-State Look at Coronavirus in Prisons,” updated Nov 6, 2020. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/05/01/a-state-by-state-look-at-coronavirus-in-prisons>.
38. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press 2007 [1984]), 110. [[return to page 4](#)]
39. Stephen Dillon, *Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State* (Duke, 2018), 29, 35. As Stephen Dillon observes, carceral governance is a key component of the neoliberal order: “I am arguing that the prison did not become central to neoliberalism after deregulation, privatization, and deindustrialization left wastelands where neighborhoods and cities once stood; instead the prison was imagined as central to the future of the ‘neoliberal utopia’ before the legal liberation of the market and the rise of the carceral state in the late 1970s and early 1980s [...] in short, neoliberalism is itself a carceral project” (38). As beholden to the temporality of progress, the violences of the market and the state became justifiable as necessary and even inescapable because the future, just like the present, was unimaginable with them.
40. Adi Robertson, “Zoom says free users won’t get end-to-end encryption so FBI and police can access calls,” *The Verge*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/3/21279355/zoom-end-encryption-calls-fbi-police-free-users>.
41. Bernadette Rubay and Peter Wagner, “Screening Out Family Time: The for-profit video visitation industry in prisons and jails,” Prison Policy Initiative, January 2015. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/visitation/report.html>.
42. Patrice A. Fulcher, “The Double-Edged Sword of Prison Video Visitation: Claiming to Keep Families Together While Furthering the Aims of the Prison Industrial Complex,” *Florida A & M University Law Review* 9.1 (2013): 83-112.
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48. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). As Lowe writes, "the past conditional temporality symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science, and also the matters absent, entangled, and left unavailable by its methods" (40-41).

49. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 17.

50. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17.

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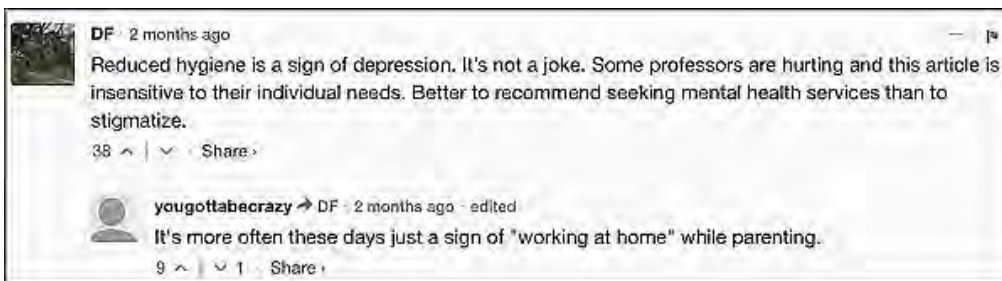
Professoring and parenting in a pandemic

by [Giovanna Chelser](#)

Though I have never wanted to parent a child, I write this with genuine love and respect for the friends in my life who are parents and guardians to children. As a colleague, I am in awe of and concerned about the unseen work that they do. Over the course of the coronavirus “shut down” and movement to online teaching, I heard from parents through social media friendships and in my former role as Program Director of Film and Video Studies at George Mason University. In mid-March 2020, the early days of the pandemic response in the United States, amidst directives to socially distance and teach online, the stress on university educators simultaneously caring for young children at home was extreme and acute. While reimaging their courses in Distance Learning modules, and advising students remotely, parents were doing double-duty as educators in Algebra, PE and History at home. Frighteningly and detrimentally, parents in my spheres were reaching the limits of what was humanly possible. They faced significant psychological strain, and some serious physical stress-induced ailments, while navigating a global health threat and a wall of school work for their young children at home.

In the coming months, parents – and particularly single parents of young children – would and continue to endure great and overwhelming challenges. In the higher education sphere specifically, universities offered little concrete support to working parents. [The University of Florida](#) faced backlash and changed course after a July communications to employees indicated they could not simultaneously care for children while working for the University from home. *The Washington Post* reported that 2 million women had dropped out of the labor force by October 2020 because of what many saw as [a choice between their children's care and their careers](#). In CNN's analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics, they revealed that *all* of the jobs lost in the American workforce – 156,000 - during December 2020 were held by women and the primary job losses endured were in positions held by women of color.

In April 2020, *Inside Higher Education* ran an advice column on “professionalism” for university educators offensively titled “[Instructors. Please Wash Your Hair.](#)” Comments poured in, many from educators alarmed by the author's condescension, misguided priorities, and lack of empathy amidst a global pandemic that was testing everyone's ability to survive financially and spiritually. The author has since apologized.



Comments from readers underscored the stresses of parenting and professoring from home in the pandemic at <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/04/16/teaching-online-should-not-mean-presenting-yourself-less-professionally-or>.

Many universities commended their senior level administrative pivots while eliding the work by adjuncts, faculty and staff on the ground. At my institution, George Mason University, our senior administrators touted themselves and IT services in [a press release about George Mason's response to moving 5,200 classes online](#). Meanwhile, educators and staff, many who are parents to young ones, were doing the most impactful work—retooling syllabi, urgently rebuilding course content, and empathetically connecting with each student individually—while being pushed to their limits. Their efforts in attending to the pandemic in home life ranged from working around technology issues, turning laundry rooms into Zoom rooms, while procuring food and supporting at-risk family members and worrying about elderly parents they could no longer see and support in person. Meanwhile, at many schools, shifting decisions by higher administration gave faculty, students and staff little time to prepare for the inevitable. In Spring 2020, the stresses of life in a global pandemic intersected with the brutal police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and a national uprising for racial justice in all sectors. Faculty and staff of color were asked to shoulder an enormous burden in simultaneously living through the moment themselves while supporting BIPOC students and responding to newly expressed “white guilt” in their own institutions. Workloads for BIPOC faculty and staff tilted heavily as they [were called to serve on emerging and long-overdue Equity and Diversity initiatives](#), the lasting structures and impacts of which remain questionable.

Zooming in a pandemic became a performance of normalcy. To Zoom-educate requires a quiet place, freedom from familial demands, high-speed perfectly functioning internet, and good lighting. Even for me, as a kid-free person but as a disabled person with a traumatic brain injury, focusing on a Zoom interface sending multiple streams of information is grueling to synthesize. Parents searched for quiet spaces at home amidst constant familial demands. Performances of imagined normalcy in the Zoom classroom of 2020 were choices but were rushed through as a given. In her essay [Rebecca Barrett-Fox](#) outlined why imperfection should have been embraced at the start of the pandemic,

“For my colleagues who are now being instructed to put some or all of the remainder of their semester online, now is a time to do a poor job of it. You are NOT building an online class. You are NOT teaching students who can be expected to be ready to learn online. And, most importantly, your class is NOT the highest priority of their OR your life right now. Release yourself from high expectations right now, because that’s the best way to help your students learn.” (2020)

For, planning could have gone the way of [Berea College](#) who ended classes, concluded grading, and conducted final correspondence offline as needed via ‘snail mail.’ Berea financially supported students in traveling away from campus. Those institutions and departments like Berea who made swift and bold moves at the start of the shut-down enacted administrative compassion, supporting health

both physical and psychological. Effective and empathic decisions embraced imperfection, faced reality, and lowered expectations from students, instructors and staff alike.

In order to hear from those laboring in double-duty as parents teaching at home and instructors teaching and advising online, I invited a group of staff, adjuncts, and faculty around the United States to provide insight and documentation of their lived experience. Most answered my questions in written form during stolen moments from April to August 2020. Some offered stream-of-consciousness emails and interviews by phone. 60% of the respondents are people of color, 80% identify as women, 10% are non-binary, and 10% are men. 50% are single parents and / or primary caregivers to their children. Each person interviewed acknowledged their privilege and many reflected upon racial and economic injustice. All educators work at institutions that remained open but online as the pandemic shut-down began. Together, these interviews (some anonymous, others named) constitute a snapshot and a document of the parent “professoring” during a pandemic. They reveal increased labor, extraordinary problem solving, collective sorrow and anger felt during the beginning of the pandemic and the 2020 uprising for racial justice. In academic units and institutions, we must support university employees impacted by the Coronavirus shut down who urgently became full time care givers and educators to children at home. My hope is that in reading these stories, administrators and senior faculty will do that work over years to come. For the detrimental impact on professional careers, trajectories, and the physical and emotional well-being of our colleagues who parent will last beyond the administering of vaccines.



[Click here to see excerpt of introductory video](#) for their course by Nico Oppen, Director and Producer of the ITVS / PBS Series “The F Word: A Foster to Adopt Story” and Assistant Professor of Communication, Santa Clara University. Professor Oppen’s piece sets expectations around the realities of their classroom from home, coupled with child care in a pandemic, and introduces their Teaching Assistant.

Leena Jayaswal, Professor and Interim Dean for Faculty Affairs, School of Communication, American University, parent to a 10 year-old.

“I was in Paris when WHO declared this a pandemic. I changed my flight and came home as soon as I could. I picked up my son from his dad’s and quarantined for the next 2 weeks. We did not leave the house at all, even for

food. My son's school was cancelled for those weeks, as they scrambled to figure out what to do. My son's father was still being required to drive into DC for work, so, all the schooling came down on me and me alone.

My son was anxious about doing online schooling. So, I literally had to sit with him and watch the videos with him and then help him do his homework. Usually, I could not attend to my own duties until noon or 1pm. I ended up catching up on my work after I put him to bed, when I would work for a few more hours. Research was absolutely the last thing I could think of. It still is. I can't find the time to do any of it. I am so fortunate to be a Full Professor, and have the PRIVILEGE not to worry how this will affect my career. I am absolutely keeping this in mind as my tenure-track colleagues move forward, kids or not.

My normally non-anxious boy became a little more needy. He is usually an 'I can do it by myself' kind of kid and that changed. I ended up spending more time with him, and when it was around school work, we both were yelling at each other, and for WEEKS, each time it ended in tears for both of us.

[At American University] there were resources for us to go to, but most of it was all on our own. I did reach out to the Photography adjuncts and asked how I could support them. Since I am Interim Associate Dean, I was in meeting after meeting working with the administration, so we did a lot together as this group.

I have never felt this much of a failure, a failure with being a parent, and a failure at work. I have worked extremely hard in my career to "appear" one way in academia, because I'm a woman and a woman of color. I never wanted my failures or weaknesses to be shown because I never wanted it to be a reason or excuse for others to use against me. I cried every day with my son as we did homework. That lasted for the first few weeks, but then I got some ideas from my friends that were also my best moms and that helped. We got into a groove at the end of it and there were no more tears. But I also let lots go, i.e. research. I just couldn't do it all. My ex-husband was eventually able to help, we discussed strategies and ways to make our son feel empowered to do the work. Because we were able to do this as a team, it worked. I am lucky to have a relationship with my ex that is not hurtful or vengeful and that we both ultimately just really love and care for our son. Luckily, I also have best friends who are moms to help lift me up, as we all rotated with our own mental breakdowns.

I have to say that George Floyd has thrown me more than the Pandemic did. The amount of work put on women and people of color to deal with the University on issues of racial injustices and racial inequalities is far more of my time and mental space than the pandemic. If the University can turn things around so quickly on the pandemic, they should look at racial injustices/ inequalities, etc. with that same urgency. I have had to deal with more white fragility these past two weeks than I have my entire career. I have felt more exhausted by these events in terms of my personal life and work than the pandemic."

Lori Yi, Academic Advisor, George Mason University, parent to a 2 year-old and 6 year-old, lives with her partner and his elderly parents – one with dementia.

"When the shutdown happened, it was during the peak of my advising cycle. My entire day was full of advising appointments with only a 30-minute break for lunch. I had to make a full breakfast for the kids, fix and gulp down my own lunch, and quickly pass them on to my father-in-law, which mainly means he lets them

watch TV all day long. When I had 10 minutes between meetings, I quickly made the kids a morning snack, made sure they were drinking enough water and going to the bathroom. Then, another snack in the afternoon for the kids, more emails and appointments. By the end of all of that, I was stressed, tired, and overwhelmed. Once 5:00 p.m. hit, I started dinner, fed the entire family, put the kids to sleep, and cleaned the house with my partner. Nights were just a blur to then wake up and start all over again.



Image by Lori Yi of her current office located in her bedroom and across the hall from her children's bedroom.

The pandemic also hit during my busiest time of the semester, course registration for Summer and Fall 2020. In addition to my usual duties, this added a layer of unknowns that was difficult for everyone involved. I've had to learn a brand-new system to deliver Orientation Advising online while continue to advise current students about Fall semester when that's usually settled by end of April. I felt like I had to choose between my students and my kids. There were days where I made my kids the priority and others where my students came first. Either way, I felt guilt about not serving both sides adequately.



Image by Lori Yi of George Mason University. Her first home office in her laundry room flared her eczema. This required moving to the bedroom across the hall from her two young children.

I broke several times over the past three months. With high levels of stress and my dusty work environment, my usually maintained eczema flared into hives across my face and both arms. Although I met online with my dermatologist, went on antibiotics and got stronger creams, it's still a problem going into month nine of the pandemic.

I was able to create my own schedule and had the freedom to accomplish my work when I could with the additional responsibilities. I wonder and have heard about staff whose supervisors expected work to only happen during 9-5 hours and weren't accommodating to their role as a parent/guardian."

Damien Coor, Adjunct Professor of Cinematography, George Mason University

"Simultaneously, my 11 year-old (5th grade), 9 year-old (4th grade) and 8 year-old (2nd grade) were now enrolled in the "Damien and Maria Bilingual Home School for Coor Children" or DMBHSCC for short. I was the Head Master, Gym teacher, History teacher, IT, Technology Enrichment Specialist, Math Aide, Language Arts and Science teacher. My wife, Maria was the Spanish Language Arts, Spanish Literature, Math teacher, Lunch Lady and music teacher. It was a heck of a ride. But we all survived.

All of our problems were "First World," and at no time did I lose sight of how lucky we were compared to so many during this challenging time. Right now, three weeks after their school has ended, we are just resting, reflecting and preparing for whatever the future holds as our new "normal." Although, amidst all of the uproar of our nation's continued struggles with inequality, it has given me time to have serious conversations with my children. I remember being about 8 years old when my parents made me watch *Roots*. This feels the same. We watched the news and watched footage of these men being killed. It was a lot for them to digest but it sparked a dialogue amongst my multi-cultural family unit, which I am grateful for."

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Shayna Connelly, Associate Professor,
DePaul University has two children –
a 13 year-old (7th grade) with documented
IEP/accommodations and a 10 year-old (in 5th grade).

"My husband was working from home. He was able to do much of the domestic work and could monitor the kids' school to an extent. If they had tech issues, I needed to step in to solve the problem. Part of my situation that was critical was my house. Constant interruptions from my kids are still an issue. My office is on a back porch off the kitchen. It does not have a door I can close and only a half-wall partitioning it. Despite conversations about how interruptions hurt (and sometimes completely kill) my train of thought, I cannot get my kids to leave me be unless they have screen time. Their screen time increased already and I don't want to extend it to all day.

The kids' mourning everything they'd lost became a priority that needed to be addressed in the moment any time it was expressed. In the beginning it was near constant and after a few weeks it was intermittent. They asked repeatedly and often when they would be allowed to go back to school, they would cry or get frustrated and angry just like with any grieving process. Even for tween/teen kids, these are big feelings to process and despite their language abilities and understanding of the world, hard to articulate. Regular Zoom chats for my daughter helped, though they required a lot of planning among a group of mothers, which was added labor for me. Both kids regressed and started playing with toys they'd outgrown or re-reading books that comforted them. My son, who is normally not very physically affectionate started reaching out to me every time I passed by him and in addition will come in to check on me to give me a hug several times a day.

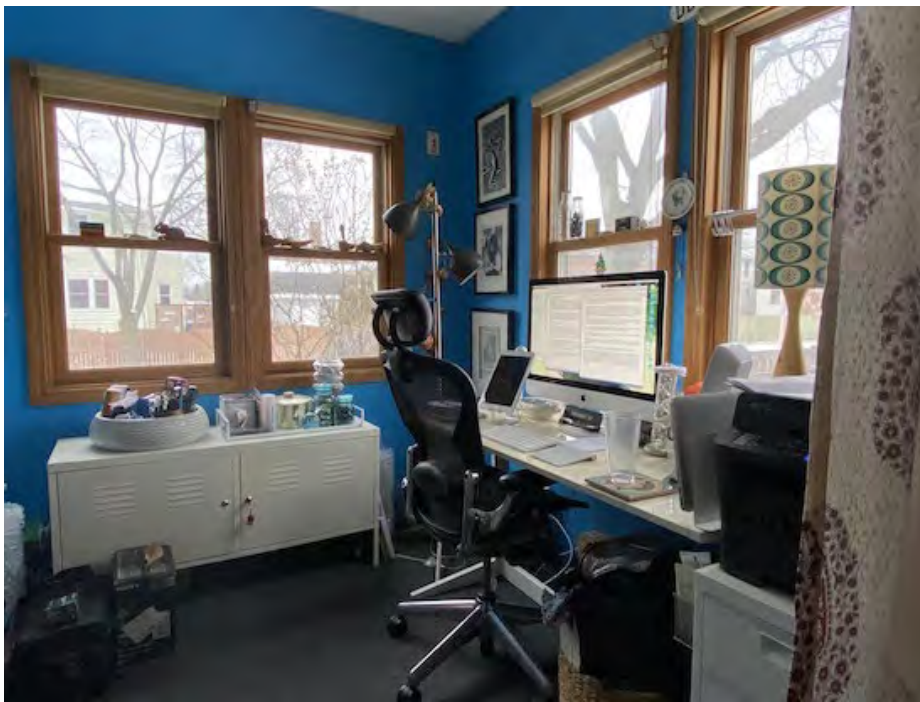


Image by Shayna Connelly of DePaul University of her home office in her insulated back porch with a newly installed curtained partition.

We were near the end of our quarter and I preemptively canceled my week 10 classes and worked individually with students to accommodate their final assignments that were planned but suddenly not feasible. Overnight I also went from being fully prepped for three classes (an overload for me) to not-at-all prepared. All my classes had to be scrapped because they were designed for face-to-face. I started accommodating my students with their finals while also scrambling to turn three spring quarter directing classes – all of which were heavily experiential – into effective online courses. We have a strong Industrial Design department and they started offering tech workshops to support professors. I needed to learn new tools to help me even though I have significant experience with online learning. 10 years ago I went through training, took 18 months to develop a fully online course and have taught it every year since. All of that along with lots of teaching experience and curriculum design positioned me well to do this pivot to online and it still took a huge toll on me physically and emotionally. I was working week-by-week rewriting and recording lectures, changing the specifics of assignments to make them manageable and did additional written responses on student assignments in order to maintain their engagement.

There was a huge uptick in advising via email that lasted through finals and spring break. I did 50% more advising than usual just in those two weeks. One of my advisees started treating me like his administrative assistant and I had to tell him my role was not to look up email addresses for other professors on the website for him. That instance felt particularly demeaning and draining, especially when he didn't ask a male junior faculty member to do that.

I had to 'bug' my students more than usual with check-ins if they seemed to be falling off the grid, but unlike in other quarters they seemed to need and appreciate this sometimes. This paralleled pestering my kids to keep up with their assignments and reading, but honestly, I did not care much what my children turned in and did not harangue them. I am in the minority viewing my kids' situation as an opportunity for self-examination, growth and experimentation. My college students were paying for classes, some of them were graduating and that made this a different kind of opportunity for them.

My concentration and cognitive abilities were so fragile that this was especially problematic for the first two months of shelter-in-place. During our first faculty meeting in spring quarter someone suggested an alternate way to book meetings. I nearly had a nervous breakdown. The suggestion was not unreasonable, the process was not complicated, but it was straw that threatened to break me entirely.

The single most important thing children at every level needed was support and security. Success is not a priority in a pandemic, which is a realization that comes over time. Stability for the kid was not the same as continuity. I should mention we live in a wealthy first tier suburb of Chicago where many parents work in professional fields and many have graduate degrees. I became irritated with parents who were trying too hard to ensure their children's continuous academic success because in many cases it seemed to be about the parents' egos. This semi-public flailing of teachers that started almost immediately when our kids started remote learning and has increased exponentially now that the school year is over and the District is looking at fall plans. Often the critics cite, "not getting our tax dollars' worth," of education, which reveals an attitude of education as commodity. When I tried to support teachers who'd been insulted and maligned on our towns' social media pages I became personally a target. All the suggestions were terrible pedagogy ("8 hours of synchronous zoom meetings" is common). Underlying these complaints are the failings of our work, social and educational systems. For many parents, school is child care and teaching is authoritarian. "Open child's skull, insert knowledge, child tests well, gets into a 'good' college and gets a 'good' job." The ignorance and cruelty floored me.

I am not my kids' teacher. I'm only their parent and I would like that to become the mantra for parents everywhere."

Anonymous, Professor of Film, parent to a 6 year-old in 1st grade.

"My partner and I are both full time professors, so we were juggling parenting with moving our courses online. [The first weeks of shut down are] a bit of a blur to be honest. My partner and I have always needed to "split the time" in caring for our daughter since we are both FT professors and practicing artists. We developed a system (prior to the shutdown, but which became more refined as a result) where we split the day from 10-2 and 2-6, so one of us could work while the other watched our daughter for four hours, and then we switched. There were occasional conflicts, like having meetings at the same time, but they tended to work out by plugging our daughter in next to us and hoping she'd be quiet and well-behaved! Having my child at home rendered me incapable of holding any type of synchronous teaching or really doing any school-related work while she was in my direct care.

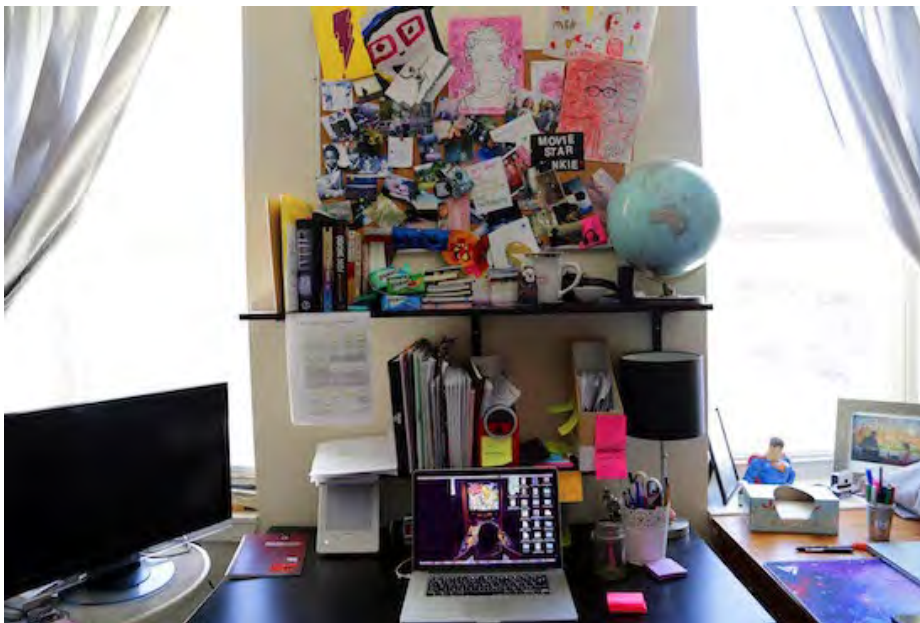


Image of a Professor's work desk and that of their daughter's virtual learning space, to the right.

There was added work as the shutdown happened including revision of syllabi, development of online teaching methodologies, maintaining online office hours, calling students who “disappeared”, making accommodations for students in inequitable technological and other scenarios (which I was happy to do – it was just a lot of extra work), offering more incompletes (which extends the school year beyond our contract), generally staying in touch with students more, and online advising for the Fall 2020 semester. Service stayed the same although online meetings became more frequent.

Administrators must be mindful of our childcare duties in general. The inability to be online 24/7, the inability to completely devote ourselves to our jobs. This is looking to be an even greater issue for the Fall, as our university is requiring us to be back in the classroom without making any accommodations for childcare issues (i.e. schools / daycares being closed or on erratic schedules that will ultimately clash with our teaching schedules). To be honest, everyone being home this past Spring will most likely be easier than what I foresee happening in the Fall. It gives me a lot of anxiety.

Something else infuriating is that my university sent out the same set of student evaluation questions at the end of the semester, without revising for emergency online teaching. I am fully promoted so it doesn't “matter” as much for me, but I worry about my colleagues who need those evaluations to be as accurate as possible and may be penalized for “bad” ones. This summer, the university is working on a set of best practices for emergency instruction (I am on this committee) and some equity-based expectations are being included. My particular university is hellbent on being back in the classroom at the expense of student and faculty health and wellbeing, they have not provided many guidelines or updated for more effective emergency remote teaching.”

**Kristy Guevara Flanagan, Associate Professor,
UCLA, Head of the Documentary Track,
parent to a 7 year-old in 2nd grade**

"I'm a single parent and her dad lives out of the area. So, I'm the head of the household and the person mostly responsible for her care in a day-to-day basis. At

first, as a single parent, I'm going shopping and didn't want her going grocery shopping with me because I didn't want to expose her. I didn't really know what to do. Her school shut down before my in-person classes did. I ended up spending hundreds of dollars and hired a babysitter to come just to finish out the quarter.

When the next quarter began, her school (which was in my eyes childcare) had many different steps of trying to figure out how they were going to try to teach the kids. Normally, she would be in school and then in after-care for me to do my job. So, I had to feed her all the time. I had to clean up after her messes. I had to make sure she was getting into every Zoom. They would do a half hour Zoom and then a half hour break and a half hour Zoom and then a half hour break. We had to set timers to make sure she was getting into those Zooms and I'd have to check on her to make sure she was doing something fairly productive and not on TV at least in the morning. I was begging her dad to come down on the two days that I taught. He more or less moved back in with us because now he could work remotely. I don't think I could have done it without that for sure.

At the university, there were some students that are in their first year and are in a rotation where they shoot week by week. So, when the university shut down, there were students who had not shot yet and they were devastated. They had put money toward their production and were halted immediately. So, you have to caretake for your students. I was getting a lot emails with concerns about what going to happen. Asking what our university was formally deciding. A lot of students wanted to get money back. I was trying to help and assist individual students that were reaching out to me. When anything happens to my doc students, they call me.



Image by Kristy Guevara-Flanagan from her workspace looking at her daughter's desk.

It was all extremely stressful. My daughter was totally unmotivated to do the work and didn't have any structure suddenly. I didn't know what my own rules were going to be. I had to keep working. It was very difficult. The teachers were like, don't worry about it. I had to let her education slide for a little while. And she was in front of a screen a lot. She was scared. She started sleeping with me again. She had some kind misplaced phobia about someone stealing her. That became increased and wasn't able to go to bed easily. Still to this day, she's sleeping with me. Bedtime is super drawn out, takes an hour and a half to fall asleep and cuddle. I still have little time to myself. We moved and now have a new home. We live near friends and the girls can play and really occupy themselves.

I was just so busy during the school year that I wasn't able to [emotionally break.] Now I'm probably doing a little bit of that. I'm processing how exhausting this is and how needy my child is. Also, the George Floyd murder happened. Students were devastated and confused. We had town halls at night. I wanted to attend them all and I am one of the few faculty of color in my department. And yet, I've got to make dinner for my kid. These are very hard choices to make.

I got some really mean evaluations from the students. The students' expected more time with me and said I wasn't focused enough. I felt pummeled by that. I feel like I'm in a department and an industry where women often don't have kids and men often do. And in my department, there's only one other woman that has a kid. It's alienating and people don't really understand the impact. I feel like – in hindsight – the faculty and the Dean could have protected us [caregivers] more and really let that students know the limitations and realities of that. Some of my students are parents as well! Administrators can check in on people that have care taking responsibilities and ask them, 'what is your schedule?' So, they know. And brainstorm about release strategies, student stipends for support, computers to overcome slow internet.

And the emails that take so much time."

Sharon Mooney, Associate Professor, Loyola Marymount University parent to a 5 year-old

"I have a partner, and we do a pretty good job of sharing parenting responsibilities equally. He does most of cooking/shopping and I do most of the cleaning/organization. We don't have any sort of family support where we are, which left us fairly isolated once the State declared the shelter in place/stay at home orders. I don't think I left our apartment for a month that wasn't just for a family walk around the neighborhood.

My child's school started online on March 16th. At first, his synchronous classes were from 8:45am-2:00pm with a few breaks, but they reduced the school day online to be from 8:45am-12:00pm after they realized this wasn't working for the kids at this age. He is not the sort of child who works independently. He is also a very social child, so after the school one of us would play with him outside, depending on our schedules and deadlines. I realized a couple of times that I had gone for days without showering.

We live in a small two-bedroom apartment. My partner and I both set up our workstations in the dining room. I spent a lot of additional money setting up a functional workspace. I have a desktop in my school office that was provided by the University that I don't have literal room for at home. I reconfigured the living room to set [my son] up with a desk. I also became tech support for him. The first week or two of his online learning was riddled with problems and he would also do things like block the camera or microphone all of a sudden. When anything went wrong, it would turn into a crisis for him. My partner and I wore ourselves

out trying to make things seem normal for our child. I was also stocking up on groceries and medicine the couple weeks before the lockdown, but felt underprepared.



Image by Sharon A. Mooney of her dining room which now includes her teaching and work desk, the work space of her partner, and their child's classroom/art space.

One of my administrative responsibilities is to manage a handful of graduate teaching assistants. Our graduate teaching assistants were paid for the entire semester but were asked to stop working immediately at shut down, so I built out lab exams for the faculty to administer. I dedicated a lot of time to revise the requirements without graduate assistants, while keeping the classes and requirements as consistent and intact as possible. I was also meeting with Avid about student software access, compiling student names/software needs with our tech staff, and researching potential replacement options and online tools. This is along with teaching my full load. We finally had to come up with alternative projects for the students – undergraduate and graduate – who had not yet shot their films.

All of these things happened in a week.

During this week we did not hold classes so we could pivot to fully remote classes and so students could move out of the dorms. Later, we were asked to “please account for” the lost course content/hours by creating additional work/projects for the students, that created more prep and grading for us. This honestly felt like a slap in the face. Many of the full-time faculty were working around the clock during these additional hours, revising our entire course load, and helping with other classes staffed by part-timers.

After that, we had a lot of additional faculty meetings. We had two full faculty meetings, two town halls – one school and one university, multiple department meetings, curriculum alignment discussions to adapt projects, end of semester thesis and class screenings for an entire week, etc. Some other faculty members would schedule meetings at night time with the expectation that we would be free, when I was not.

Because I also teach specialized post production classes, we have an issue with equipment and hardware access for some students, which is not easy to predict. Teaching online actually requires more hours than teaching in the classroom. Understanding the differences between each discipline and not taking a one size fits all approach to online teaching is important. Adapting to each student's individual needs was important, as they were all experiencing different forms of problematic situations caused by the pandemic. Extending deadlines, grading with their technology issues in mind, and using different criteria to evaluate

participation or engagement were important tactics for me. Completely adapting my production class to focus on DIY methods was critical. They usually want to go big, and we talked about what it was to go small and have more freedom and flexibility in doing so

I personally took a lot of cues from the methods my child's elementary school teachers were using online. They adjusted and pivoted when they realized something wasn't working, which I appreciated. The public-school district mandated that no student would be punished by lowered grades during the pandemic. Grades could go up, but not down. This considered things like family responsibilities, family stresses, and technology access. The district provided resources and drop off centers so students could access food. It seemed like vulnerability of not just the student, but possibly the entire family unit, was considered in some of their decisions.

There was an evening where my partner found me crying hysterically because I hadn't given written feedback to 12 student films by the deadline I had promised. I went to bed, barely slept, and got up very early to try to get them notes with some sort significance. I also broke emotionally when thinking (or actually obsessing) about what would happen if both my husband and I got sick or if we both died. All of our family is on the East coast, and all of them have pre-existing conditions even if we could get our kid to one of them.

I have been fighting feeling disappointed. Half of me tells me that I'm selfish for being disappointed when there's a global crisis and I should focus on what I did get done. Half of me tells me I'm allowed to be disappointed with missed screenings, and cancelled projects and festival juries. Although through this I was also finishing the edit of a friend's feature, I feel like I haven't done enough and am failing to live up to the expectations of my department. I don't know if I have the bandwidth to try to make something new over the summer.

I don't know that I have recovered emotionally. I am not sleeping and filled with anxiety, although maybe it's slightly less, or it has become normalized.

I am a proponent of learning through play. I subscribe to this philosophy in my own classes too. It's hard, if not impossible, to create that space for play both for small kids who might need the physical interaction, and for adults who have learned over time that play based learning is not worth time or money. I can frame play as a "mode of exploration and risk taking" during in-person classes more effectively than when I try to do it online.

I appreciate watching my kid figuring out how to be bored. Because he is a super social kid and because we live in an apartment with limited outside space, he always had playdates and activities galore. He was overscheduled, and now that he is not, he is beginning to figure out how to be by himself. Not much, but a bit."

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Notes

Giovanna thanks Dr. Nzingha Kendall, Assistant Professor of Film and Screen Studies at Pace University, for her guidance and support in framing this piece and teaching me how to navigate early pandemic responses as a compassionate educator, and Assistant Professor Maura Ugarte at George Mason University who helped raise the concerns of parents struggling in the pandemic in our Film program and inspired this project. This essay is dedicated to the parents and guardians in our higher education profession.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Video production exercise by Liz Miller's class: "Portrait of a working professional." Focus on a family member or friend within your bubble, someone whose work life had changed as a result of COVID-19.



Dancing Alone (dir. K. Peter Morgan). Dance studio owner Nancy Morgan may now be dancing alone, but she's aiming to turn her new online existence into the best it can be.



Teaching in times of protest and pandemic

by [Brenda Longfellow](#), York University
[Liz Miller](#), Concordia University
[Dorit Naaman](#), Queen's University

It's January, the sky is gray and we're fielding a dozen emails a week from students suffering from mental health issues. We're now in the peak of the third wave of the pandemic, people are dying in record numbers, our ICUs are full to bursting and the lethal inability of politicians to manage, control or at least slow the pandemic is ever more apparent. A new term begins. We're now in month 10 of the pandemic, month 10 of teaching. There is a vaccine but the light at the end of this tunnel is very very dim.

In the spring when this all started, we knew we were in uncharted territories and that our assignments, convenings, access to equipment, relations with students would all have to be recalibrated. Tethered to our computers, we were confronted with a tsunami of advice and learning opportunities, not to mention the advertising skills that began appearing in our inboxes encouraging us to buy new software and platforms to teach production online. Webinars, conferences, social media posts, zoom meetings, TED Talks, workshops on software like Miro, Loom and Canva promise to drag us into the future with sleek technological affordances and smart design. Very few of these offerings raised issues around social justice or how to teach reflexivity and accountability in times of pandemic AND protest.

Teaching in times of pandemic and protest could not ignore where we are, or how challenging this was going to be. Instead, being reflexive about these new conditions seemed essential.

In pushing that boulder of course prep up the mountain, we were supported by enormously rich discussions convened by Patty Zimmerman at Ithaca College and Helen de Michiel at San Francisco State which brought together artists, scholars, media makers and journalists to discuss and share best practices during these strange times. These monthly confabs were enormously enriching. In fact, we had never researched or thought about pedagogy with that amount of depth, ever.

To begin with, all three of us teach at public universities in Canada where, with few exceptions, all on-campus courses have been commuted to remote learning for the upcoming academic year. Two of us (Liz and Brenda) teach in the suburbs of major metropolitan cities (Montreal and Toronto) at commuter campuses where our students are highly diverse and are, almost all, negotiating the pressures of balancing part time work with school responsibilities. One of us (Dorit) teaches in a mid-sized university town to a high proportion of first-generation immigrants and international students, primarily from the PRC.

A Teacher Coping with COVID-19 (dir. Tamara Chazin). Adriana explains how her students need reinforcements to be able to recognize their teachers while they are wearing head-to-toe PPE.



Essential Mobility during COVID-19 (dir. Anthony-James Armstrong). Bus driver Odette Armstrong is facing risks while adapting to the different measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Don't Fall (Dir. Jeanne Goulet-Hardy). Patrick Hardy takes his daughter Jeanne on a plane ride and shares his disappointment that COVID-19 is not the ideal time to transition his career from communication expert to pilot.



Times are Hard - Treat Yourself (dir. George Adjani). If looking good is feeling good, should hair care be considered an essential service. Sophia treats herself with a hair makeover before the city goes into lockdown.

Our shared and unique pedagogical orientation is around experimentation, improvisation, and teaching documentary in relation to its legacies around social justice. Frequently this involves using new technological forms and platforms that facilitate interactivity, non-linearity or immersive practices. Our documentary courses typically emphasize the techniques and politics of collaboration, ethical issues in documentary practices, deep reflections on ongoing consent, respectful protocols for working in community and building and sustaining relations with documentary subjects. We also emphasize process over product, a variety of platforms as opposed to glorifying the single channel work, and the roles of an accountable filmmaker.

In the beginning of moving into online teaching, it was pretty clear that two of our core pillars: collaboration and working in, and with, communities would have to be radically modified. Would 'community' shrink to only those who are proximate in one's bubble—family or roommates? Would assignments necessarily be more individualized, or how would we support remote forms of student collaboration?

For us, though, the pandemic with its constraints and logistic challenges has been coupled with an acknowledgement that we were living through an incredibly historic moment sparked by #Black Lives Matter and a summer of international protest after the murder of George Floyd in the United States. BLM has had a galvanizing impact in Canada and on institutional life, as our universities (and every cultural agency in the country) has rushed to accelerate initiatives like black cluster hires and write Anti Black Racist Action plans at the Department and Faculty level.

In Canada anti-racist reckoning has been coupled with a long-standing movement to decolonize the university. In 2015 a Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report was released, which named the need to decolonize and indigenize education, among its many recommendations. Led by Indigenous faculty and allies, our institutions have been engaging in deep processes of learning, and the three of us have been intimately involved in this process.

As settlers, we felt especially responsible to think radically about how we were going to teach online and decolonize at the same time and in a way that moves beyond a rote land acknowledgement and a requisite week devoted to Indigenous content. How could we massively recalibrate our teaching to embody the urgency of anti-racist reckoning and Indigenous decolonization? What follows are a series of collated reflections that have evolved over the last months.

Unexpected collaboration (Liz)

One of the biggest challenges this semester has been confronting the "black box dilemma." I need to respect the fact that students are experiencing zoom fatigue and have different home circumstances but the result is that I can't "read the room" in the way I am used to in a classroom. Well-structured breakout rooms help but I rarely get to more than two breakout rooms in any one class period. There is an upside to this, the element of surprise.

For my year-long moving images production course, I have a "portrait" assignment where I ask students to create a short film about a working professional. It's an opportunity to have students work in small teams and film interviews and interactions. I usually tell students not to work with friends or family members and encourage them to feature someone they don't know. This year I adapted the exercise and asked them to focus on a family member or friend within their bubble, someone whose work life had changed as a result of COVID-19.



Learning (Dir. Chloé Galarneau). Rachel Camiré, student teacher of a kindergarten class, maintains a positive outlook and fun attitude with her beloved students amid the restrictions and difficulties of learning to become a teacher during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

I was both surprised and moved by the results of the exercise. It was an opportunity to break through the black box mystery and enter the intimate worlds of my students and their families. Beyond the on-screen intimacy, students had great access to family members embedded in complex work environments. Through the films I visited schools, hospitals, hair salons, sound studios, and met parents who were not only agreeing to be filmed but were also co-creators, helping to capture material on their cell phones.

Peter, for example, who does not live with his parents, coached his dad on how to film his mother, teaching her newly “remote” dance class. Jeanne’s dad took her up in a plane to talk about his disappointment that his plans to transition his career from a communication expert to a pilot were on hold as a result of COVID-19. Anthony rode along with his aunt, a Montreal bus driver who was adjusting to new safety procedures and a rush of cyclists populating Montreal’s streets. In the absence of a peer crew—friends and relatives stepped in and offered unexpected forms of collaboration.



Online School—A New Virtual Reality (dir. Pénélope Carreau). Sophie Carreau talks about the various struggles of the transition to online school because of the pandemic and speaks on how she feels students have been forgotten.



Essentially Forgotten (dir. Christine Barecki, Morgan Salama, Priscila Sanches). Morgan communicates the stress of frontline grocery workers. She manages to maintain a sense of hope through these unprecedented times.



Supply/Demand (dir. Michael Mingo). Real estate broker Daniel Engel navigates the market under the unprecedented circumstances of COVID-19.



Constable MA (dir. Magali & Mahmood). Constable Harvey reflects on a major shift in lifestyle from active RCMP, Canadian police officer, to a stay at home mother in a time of Covid.



Pastries, Prosciutto, and Plexiglass (dir. Adriana Trivisano). Gabriella Maiorino reflects on the advantages and challenges of



Finding New Ways to Communicate (dir. Valentina Mendoza). Christian works in retail and in addition to a long and lonely

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| managing a family bakery throughout COVID-19 | commute he is finding new ways to communicate with customers. |

The classroom community (Dorit)

My university is operating classes both remotely and asynchronously. In my department 40% of the students are international, and our student body spans fifteen different time zones. If we offer synchronous classes they cannot be mandatory, and they have to be recorded, subtitled and uploaded to the server. In the infrequent synchronized zoom sessions, most of the students' cameras are off. I find myself at a loss, talking to my own image and hating it. My teaching has always been dialogic: I lecture very little, and in small segments, interspersed with work with students through media and critical texts as well as their own creative work, responding to issues that are important to them which change yearly even when the content is the same. I never realized how much I rely on reading body language, which I can no longer do.

Rather than dialogic teaching—I feel that I now impart knowledge in a one-way



A Triptych by Wenjie Ren (FILM 460, taught by Dorit Naaman)

fashion. In an honours thesis course I am co-teaching, we use discussion forums for students to post work and provide feedback to each other. It is an impoverished form of discussion, and the students report a heightened burden to form thoughts carefully, to express themselves clearly, which is oppositional to the way they worked out their ideas by trying out a thought in class and then refining it through writing. But despite their scripted flow, the discussion boards also became communities of sort, and some revelations came to me. In a creative assignment students were asked to take three photos in their living space, using distinct aesthetics, but both reflecting on their living conditions under COVID and leaving a personal imprint in the series.

The results naturally varied in quality but some interesting patterns emerged: for instance windows played an important role in many of the triptychs. Cats, teddy bears and reflections came a close second. Students' responses to their peers were incredible and very telling, sharing their sense of isolation, connections, joys, and "reading" each other's photos as a testament to a collective experience. In the "old world" I could have never imagined designing a project that would go so deeply into personal spaces of students. But here we are, connecting deeply and intimately, with students I have never even seen!

Disembodied teaching (Brenda)

My deepest challenge in our Covid term has been a large (230 undergraduate students) course in Canadian Cinema. This is a required course for undergrad majors and usually focuses on a range of key conceptual debates, policy frameworks and aesthetic traditions that refract national cinema as messy assemblage of industrial, cultural and contestatory pluralities. I almost always teach it as a civics and history course, introducing concepts like settler colonialism and competing articulations of sovereignty; we investigate the evolving role of the Canadian state in the project of Indigenous dispossession and nation building. This year, in the wake of the summer of Black Lives Matter, and in response to our ongoing imperative to decolonize, I have largely focused on Indigenous and BIPOC cinemas in Canada, beginning with Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Kathleen Hepburn's gorgeous *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* and ending with Jeff Barnaby's Indigenous zombie apocalypse film *Blood Quantum*.

Like Dorit and Liz, when I teach in person, I like to use embodied interactions. I use police caution tape to cordon off the rows so students are forced to sit closer to each other and can't disappear into the back rows. Even with a large class, I prefer the Socratic method, I make a lot of jokes, tell stories and continuously and purposely digress. I might lecture for 20 minutes but this is largely intended to contextualize a series of provocations. I walk up and down the stairs of the lecture hall, handing out coloured file cards to students who contribute to the discussion. These are collected at the end of class and used toward their participation mark. "Think-pair-share" has been a great model to use in small groups and we do a lot of improvisational thinking and dialogue. I try to model critical thinking and collective knowledge creation through the development of a series of open-ended questions and debates. The virtual classroom was obviously going to cramp a lot of this style.

I made the first session compulsory and synchronous; to my amazement 175 of my 230 students showed up, zooming in from Singapore, Azerbaijan, India, China, Hong Kong, and from suburban bedrooms and kitchens in Ontario. Synchronous attendance was optional for weeks two and three and (not surprisingly) attendance dropped precipitously to 80 and then to 25. I don't think it was because these sessions were deeply boring; for those who showed up, we had lively and rich discussions. But clearly the majority required deep flexibility around convening their online lives.

I have colleagues who are delivering lectures that consist of one audio file of them reading their notes. I understand, many are completely overwhelmed and are only just learning Moodle, our 'learning management' system. I strongly felt that if I was going to have any engagement at all, I had to offer something a little more refined and I just could not bear the idea of doing powerpoint for twelve long weeks. Visme, a design software, promised to "take my professional presentation skills to new heights."

So I bit the bullet, bought the subscription and learned about design possibilities and how to do graphic animation. Mind you, this means I have tripled my workload and it has been taking at least two full days+ to write and record a script, edit narration, source images, links, and GIFS to embed, while animating these with 'engaging infographics.' When I asked for feedback on these online creations, one student wrote, "Your lectures are like having dessert after a five star dinner"!! I think that means 'good,' not hideously overly satiated.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Liz Miller's production class exercise: "Place and Counter Narrative." Explore a public place that is meaningful to you, tell its history and what's missing.



The Colonizer's Footsteps (Dir. Tamara Chazin). An exploration of colonizer's footsteps in René-Levesque Park, Montreal.



Running from the Windmill (Dir. Elisa Stutz). While waiting for repairs following a damaging rain storm, a green fence blocks off visitors from entering the historic windmill in the Pointe Claire village. What history is on view here and what history is missing?



Engaging with difficult conversations (Dorit)

My department has always welcomed social justice curriculum and we all teach mainstream media critically. As the coordinator of our graduate program, I have organized a series of training sessions for teaching assistants, including sessions on diversity, decolonization, accessibility and ethics. A guest speaker from the Human Rights Office joined us on zoom to discuss engaging with difficult conversations. To her and my surprise, we realized very quickly that the difficult conversations we usually engage with in our classroom have quietly slipped away from the syllabi. I started asking my colleagues about the changes in such content as a result of teaching in a new form, and it turned out that most have self-censored, leaving difficult material out, since there is no proper space to process together, unpack, debrief, and build a shared criticality. When students are left alone with video lectures, readings and assignments, even lame content, such criticality is sometimes misunderstood.

Furthermore, Indigenous wisdom and cosmology is learned and experienced in relations to others, both human and non-human. The circle is an incredibly important place where stories are shared and knowledge is obtained. Teaching via zoom, especially asynchronously cannot offer us circles. It supports an individual student, a direct and singular recipient of knowledge, in at best a two-way exchange. A colleague teaching post-production told me she meets 8-10 times with each student on each assignment! This platform is the "best" example of neoliberal practices. In this format, the goal of unsettling/decolonizing our classrooms will likely mostly have to wait. Some measures can be taken, such as co-facilitation of live sessions, but the full-class circle of learners, the emphasis on process, on the magic that happens in the classroom is lost.

What is gained is a more intense, and highly effective group support structure. In my experience most students take time to engage with their peers in meaningful ways. For each stage of the process in the Honours thesis course (toolkit; proposal; mid-year presentation of progress) students have two deadlines: first they post to a discussion board in a group of 4-5 students, where they all comment on each other's work, and I offer comments and responses to the comments as well. Then the students have a chance to revise and resubmit for grading. This format allows them to integrate, respond to, and consider the criticism offered. I am especially impressed with the responses to students who are making films about sensitive issues: racism faced by Asian students during the pandemic; mental health; the experience of international students; etc. Group members seem able to respond with both empathy, critical suggestions, and a recognition of their own place in the social structure. I realize now, that difficult conversations have not disappeared altogether from the course, but have migrated, emerging organically from the work students are producing, and met with openness by the other students.

Rethinking production exercises and decolonization (Liz)

Place-based assignments have been a helpful way to encourage students who have been "stuck at home" to get outside and explore. They were also a prompt for me to re-think how I want to teach moving images.

Tarnished Faith (dir. Lilly Wang). An emotive inquiry into the dissonance between the beauty of a Montreal church and the hidden facets of its cultural memory and history.



Far From Home (Dir. Florence Garneau). Bystanders wait for the metro to get to their desired destination, without recognizing the harm and injustice the land and people have suffered to offer this service.



Natural Agency (dir. Anthony-James Armstrong). The Portrait of Pierre le Moyne d'Iberville statue was removed due to its state of deterioration but there are other critical questions to uncover about the origins of the statue.

For years I have been teaching a year-long undergraduate moving images production course. This last semester I was part of a working group with a mandate to “decolonize our curriculum.” The invitation was a chance to rethink our teaching in the zoom company of Donna Kahérakwas Goodleaf, director of decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy at Concordia University. My first challenge was to adapt my “place-based portrait” into an opportunity to engage critically with the concept of land acknowledgements. In previous years, I used the exercise to evaluate students’ skills around shot composition, coverage and editing and to engage in a class-wide collaborative initiative. For example, last year, pre-COVID-19, my students and I created a collection of two-minute “tree portraits” that the city of Montreal now uses as part of a tree Canopy awareness campaign.

This semester I renamed the exercise, “Place and Counter Narratives” and asked students to explore a public site they care about or visit frequently. They had to observe, research and document the history “on view,” and reflect on what was missing. The next step was to insert a short text into their videos to create a counter narrative. At the time, Montreal was erupting with protests targeting sites such as the Sir John A. Macdonald monument. Macdonald is Canada’s first prime minister and he played a major role in instituting the residential school system.

The exercise prompted meaningful conversations about how parks, monuments and signs perpetuate logics and inequities, and we had meaningful conversations about the role of land acknowledgements. The exercise also offered a chance to share and foreground indigenous artists such as Rebecca Belmore and Kent Monkman who have staged counter narratives in their own work. While COVID-19 prevented me from engaging in a collaborative place-based assignment, the effectiveness of using a personal place-prompt to encourage students to get out of the house and to re-think public and personal history was effective and one that I will refine and repeat.

Opening the class to the world (Brenda)

Large enrollment courses for me have always been a bit about performance and putting on a “show.” While most weeks I’m posting my impeccably designed audio-visual presentations, for some weeks I’ve mixed it up by posting an interview with a filmmaker or by organizing a high-profile webinar with filmmakers, producers and creators that is open to the whole university and the public. We have completed three so far: one on BIPOC producers, one on Black cinemas in Canada and one on Indigenous women creators, which has been co-presented with ImagineNATIVE, a Toronto based international indigenous film and media festival. These webinars have been a wonderful opportunity to think about relations and community building as a core part of film culture in this country and to hear personal and discursive engagements with many of the issues we have been exploring around Indigenous sovereignty and racial and cultural diversity. Collaborating with ImagineNATIVE opened our classroom to a wider public and we ended up with a large audience of 300 people. The ‘liveness’ of the webinar created a buzz and involved people who would never venture into a university classroom.



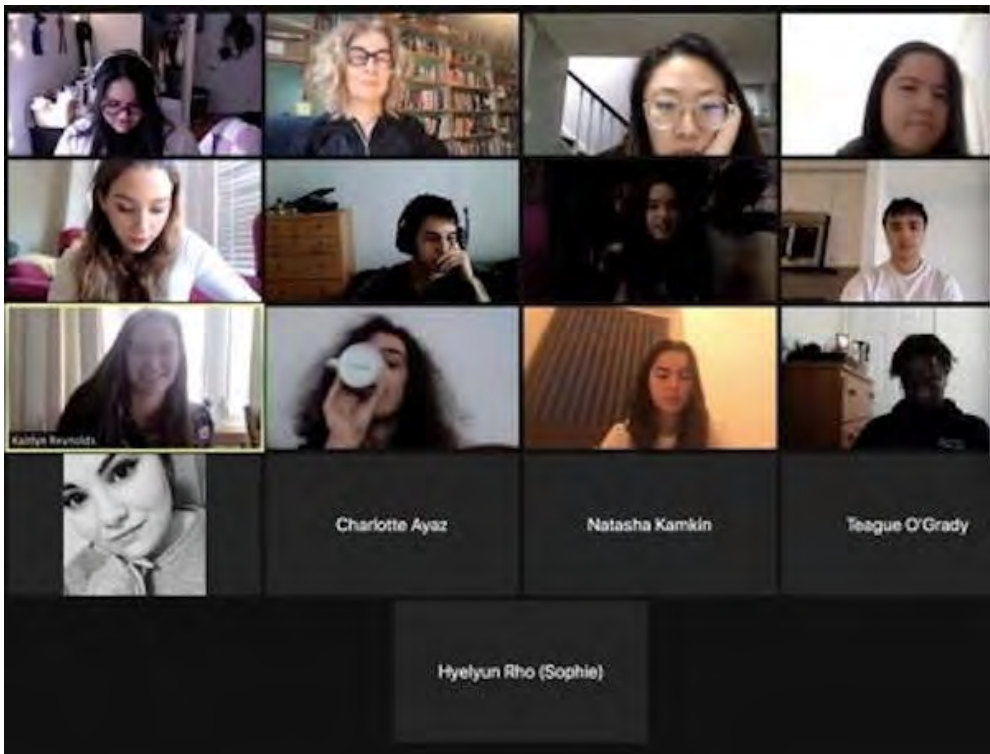
Indigenous Women's Cinema in Canada Webinar, November 24th, 2020. Top Row: Jamie Whitecrow, Moderator, Current MFA student at York University, Niki Little, Artistic Director ImagineNATIVE, Lisa Jackson. Bottom Row: Tasha Hubbard, Amanda Strong.

Liveness and peer support (Liz)

My favorite moments in a production class are often the rough cut screenings. As the lights go down, silence fills the room and students nervously anticipate the feedback of their peers. In a remote classroom how do we simulate the energy of that moment, the liveness, or what Bell Hooks calls the eros of the classroom. Fostering remote collaboration or support has been a challenge that extends beyond a feedback session and is an ongoing concern. This semester I piloted a range of strategies to facilitate peer engagement—from asking students to comment in zoom chats to organizing cluster screenings with speed dating features—and I learned a few things about online possibilities for peer review.

While I maintain my allegiance to a shared physical event in a big auditorium, I have noticed that it's often a handful of students who have the confidence to offer feedback publicly. And if there are many projects, some students get short-changed in a large feedback session. This semester I used Microsoft TEAMS as a platform to organize small peer support groups. I am not promoting this software platform per se, but it's what I had access to and I began by speaking about the ways that software companies profit from disaster. The groups met regularly to discuss their work at different stages of production, from proposal evaluation to rough cut.

I asked each group to assign a facilitator and a notetaker to ensure even distribution of feedback. During class time, we used a pre-formatted shared document for students to post feedback in a live format so I could see their work without visiting each breakout room. I used methods like Liz Lerman's critical response process to reinforce the art and value of giving great feedback. While it was not the same experience as past semesters, students confirmed that these peer sessions were one of the best aspects of the class, and I will continue to explore ways to cultivate the kind of solidarity that production courses can create.



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Affective labour (Brenda)

I've halved the expectations around individual assignments and am continuously extending deadlines to try to staunch the wave of emails asking for various accommodations. I have never had so many students (I would venture this is about a quarter of all of my students) ask for accommodation. And if they don't have a formal accommodation letter (having gone through an assessment with Student Accessibility Services) they write me that they are suffering severe mental distress. I have had students who have been hospitalized. I have had students who have contracted Covid, I have had students whose whole family has contracted Covid and students whose grandparents have died as a result of Covid. I have had students who are front line workers whose shifts increased because they are the only one on their work team who still test negative. I have had students who have had to move three times this term because of economic pressures. I don't demand official medical certification for these students, I offer support and flexibility. I am still accepting assignments that are three months overdue, kindness goes a very long way.

In my large-enrollment studies class, I added the option of completing their major assignment as a video essay rather than a conventional academic one, and over half have chosen this option. Why? Because it asks for criticality to be embodied, it allows for alternate modes of knowledge building and it is fun. In these times, fun has to be a core pedagogical principal.

Body memories (Liz)

The first year I taught film production I enrolled in a winter kayak class. Each week in my kayak class we had to simulate rolling (a complete underwater flip in the kayak) in a swimming pool so that when we confronted an actual rapid, we would have the body memory to respond correctly. I shared this experience with my students and encouraged them to rehearse regularly so that they might develop body memories with the equipment they were using, to confront adversity on location. Patty Zimmerman and Helen de Michiel's zoom conversation series with professors and artists invested in co-creation was a vital space to discuss and pilot facilitation methods. We rehearsed break out rooms and shared methods like "pass the baton" to get students to pay attention to each other and to assume a stance of co-moderation.

Our sessions were informative and offered us an opportunity to develop new body memories for moderating an engaging class in the midst of a global pandemic. That said, my body memory hasn't always translated to fully effective classes. I still talk a bit too much, miss cues for breaks and forget what it's like to be a student in a zoom environment. This is very much an ongoing process and one that requires flexibility, but it is assuring to have a body memory of what great facilitation can be.





The Artist and their Ghosts (Dir. Patrick Dunlop). Jennifer Lynch reflects on the dichotomy between success, inspiration and trauma in her work as a young artist attempting to move beyond purely nostalgic work. Covid-19 presented new challenges for artists. **[Editor: are these two separate pieces? Need two captions?]**

Thought experiments in zoom (Brenda)

In the final weeks of my MA seminar on Methods and Research, we were talking about regimes of visibility and Google Earth, working our way through a reading by Anna Munster. The student presenting posted questions on Chat and one of them was, “What would Google look like if it was a public utility?” I loved this question, so we played a thought experiment game and everyone had to come up with one or two qualities of our publicly owned and operated corporation. My sophisticated and tech-savvy grad students have adapted easily to online work, hijacking the Chat function to provide ongoing ironic commentary during our discussions and to disrupt the monologic.

I started the semester having them work in pairs writing, shooting and editing a critical video essay on Covid media. They’ve told me this really facilitated social connection and they emerged from the course as a caring, and bonded cohort. They’ve started their own community on Discord where they have social convenings and gossip sessions (so essential to grad experience).

After a term in the trenches, I have actually grown to appreciate aspects of online teaching and can see how I would incorporate certain elements into future post-pandemic teaching. I now have an excellent series of well-produced lectures that students can visit or even re-visit on their own time. I’m shedding a lot of my nostalgia for the good old days of in-person, embodied teaching, which in many ways relates more to the beginning of my teaching career 25 years ago when classes were considerably smaller, when students weren’t facing extraordinary precarity and when neo-liberalism hadn’t completely sunk its claws into public universities.

Online teaching, especially for commuter universities where students can spend hours getting to campus can provide some measure of flexibility. Zoom can be gruelling, of course, but it can also be hacked in smaller group contexts through breakout rooms, white boards and thought experiments into something resembling a kind of intimacy. In my 20-person production class this term, my students are comfortable turning on their cameras and I love seeing their faces in their bedrooms and kitchens with siblings and parents walking through the background. As Dorit mentioned—pets are great ice breakers. In my first class, the students held up their cats and I walked my laptop over to introduce Cleo, my 9 year old black lab snoring in a corner of my office.

Making peace with black boxes (Liz)

Now after a third term in the trenches, I have some insights about how to proceed in what might become another semester or perhaps another year of teaching production online. Half-way through last semester our undergraduate students conducted a survey about what was working in their classes. It was helpful. The



A Window through Time in China (Dir. Shengmei Rui). Walking in the Yu Garden and looking through a window with Chinese traditional decorations, makes one wonder about time and if the pandemic ever happened.

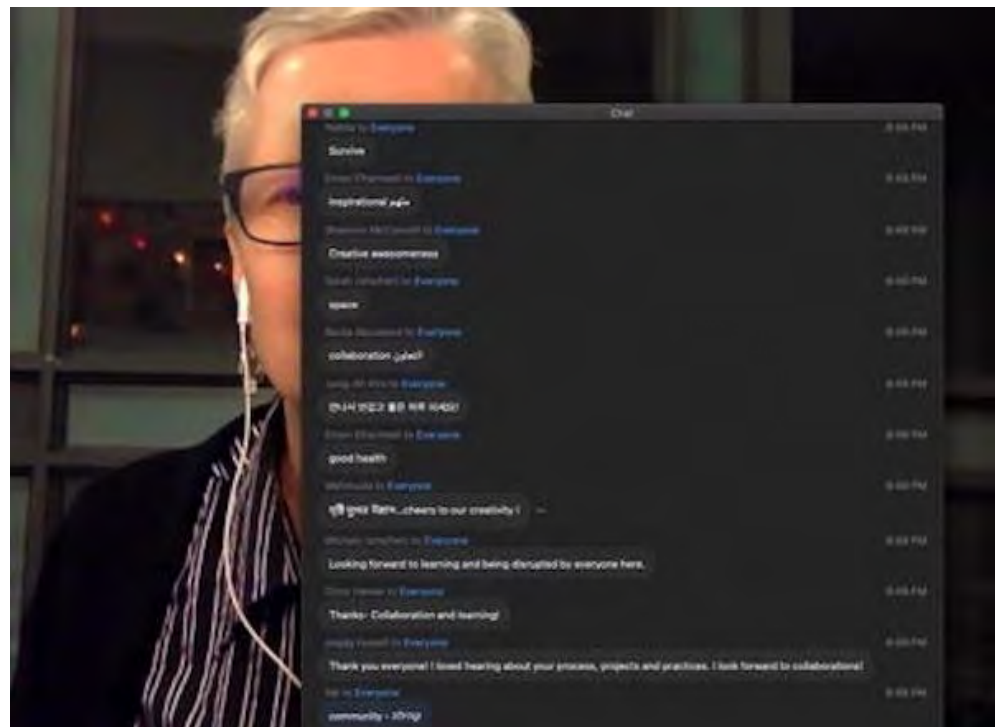
key message they communicated was “less is more.” In our anxiety to ensure students were getting the most out of a truly unpredictable environment, many of us overcompensated. We simply didn’t get what it would mean for students to be taking so many online courses all at the same time. And in speaking to colleagues, I realized that most students were working harder than they ever had. For many students, generalized anxiety had translated to a hyper production mode—a new form of freaking out, one I had not anticipated.

Adjusting expectations has become a new method in the tightrope of offering motivation and structure, while being careful not to foster new forms of anxiety—for them and for us. My plans for this semester are to breathe easy in front of black boxes, to encourage students to get outside and do work they care about. And I plan to continue to consult with and learn from the wisdom of my colleagues, like Dorit and Brenda and the new colleagues we met through the co-creative confab space of last fall .

The intimacies of four continents (Dorit)

I think about Lisa Lowe’s brilliant book by the title above as I sit down for my first class of Winter 2021. Lowe traces the roots and routes of enslavement, indentured labour, and migration within a capitalist and colonial systems. She draws long and twisted lines across the globes, and offers a fascinating bird’s eye view. Now the globe has somewhat collapsed. My first question to the students is, “What time is it where you are?” We quickly find out that we are in six different time zones, spanning eleven hours between us.

It is January, and out of my study window you can see snow covering the ground and dotting the hedges. I imagine the snow, the quiet, serene, and muted colours of winter. I imagine it because I am in Jerusalem, where it has not rained in over a month and it is “unseasonably” warm [will our COVID reality and climate change reality ever be “normal?”]. One benefit of the pandemic is that we all work remotely, and when a family emergency called me to Jerusalem, I could up and go without taking a leave. Aside from a stressful flight and a nail-biting quarantine, all went well.



I am now settled in a different lockdown, taking care of my parents during the days, and working in Canada all evening long. I am physically in one place, but half my day is governed by the temporalities and realities of another, mediated, mostly smoothly, through a computer. So when I sat down to teach, I was hyper aware that Lowe's meticulously long lines—stretched between China, India, the West Coast of Africa and the New World—are all merged on my computer screen.

It is a graduate seminar in Research-Creation, and most of the students are artists who are back in academia to think through, and produce knowledge, that stretches the bounds of conventional academic thinking. Graduate seminars tend to be focussed on the presence, dynamic and contributions of the students. They are conversations that evolve within a tight community of thinkers and makers. Sometimes, at the end of class, when someone opens the door, it feels as if all our intense thinking, processing and negotiating is wafting out, like smoke. How do I compensate for the intensity of the face-to-face encounter, or can I? I was grateful my grad seminar was scheduled for the second term, and spent time overhauling the syllabus so that it is better suited to meetings over zoom and collaborative work in our LMS.

I decided to co-teach the classes starting in week 3 with one or two students. I have found that my focus on zoom is much better when there is a conversation, interview, or co-facilitation. It is more effective than when one person is lecturing. I also thought that the planning sessions will allow me to get to know the students better, and then I'd be able to support them better in their own projects. Finally, I find that on zoom, I—as facilitator— cannot always keep up with both the chat and the spoken conversation. If two of us are facilitating, we can take turns.

Other design elements include two students who will be scribes during each session, and facilitate a discussions board activity after class. I also opted to use a software that allows us to read, comment and ask questions of parts of articles or documents (Perusall). The software makes it easy to spy on students, but as I did not link it to my gradebook, and left it as an optional tool, I believe it will allow for another communal space/activity, a place where we can learn together and from each other.

At the end of class I asked the students to write in the chat, in whatever language they like, a wish for our semester together. Here is some of what came up:

Learning together; Collaboration; Mutual disruptions; Good health; Creative awesomeness; Survive; New forms of knowledge; Space; Inspiration; And some wishes in languages I do not know.

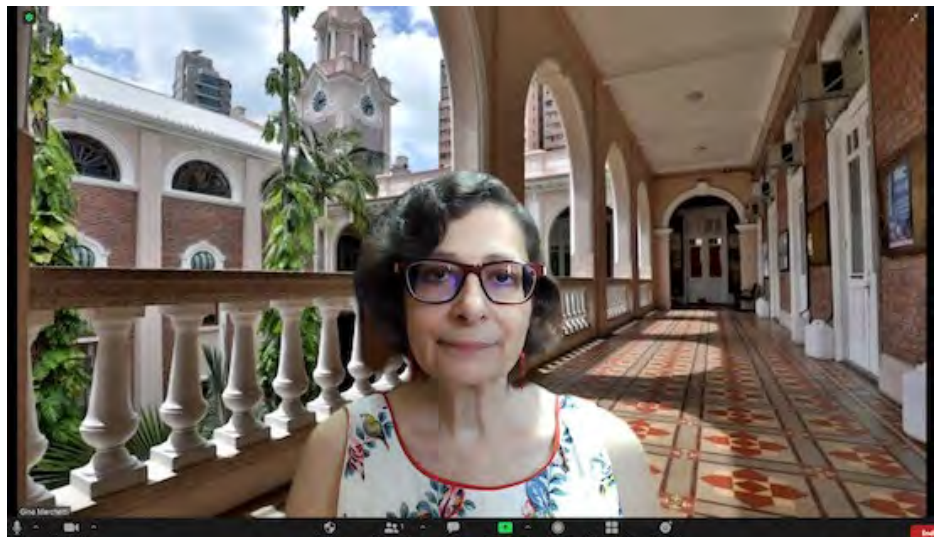
My wish is that we form a community despite our virtual meeting place. I do believe it is possible.



Teaching online on borrowed time: Hong Kong protests, pandemics, and MOOCs

by [Gina Marchetti](#)

Pandemics create their own time warps, and science as well as science fiction tell us that our subjective perception of time and our biological rhythms miss their usual beats during outbreaks. Lockdowns disrupt routines, eliminate schedules, and limit interactions with people outside the household. COVID-19 creates its own sense of time at the intersection of pandemic chronology and the digital time that now occupies so much of our lives on screen. Some measure time as the progression of COVID-19 across borders, in their own country, community, family, or their own bodies on Google maps and through social media. Waiting for a future vaccine, others tick off the days it takes to get tested, find out results, remain in quarantine, repeating the process periodically. Screen-time sets the agenda for the socially distant. Plugging into the digital world creates another sense of time in which we become more attuned to the global clock that takes us out of our own time zones more frequently. For teachers and students in many parts of the world, this means online education and a dramatically different pedagogy associated with these pandemic times.



Gina Marchetti in her “Zoom room” with a virtual background of the Main Building at the University of Hong Kong. The clock tower in the photograph reminds students that teaching time goes on even if the clock has stopped.

In *Wired*, Arielle Pardes writes this about the elasticity of “coronetime”:

“The virus has created its own clock, and in coronatime, there is less

demarcation between a day and a week, a weekday and a weekend, the morning and night, the present and the recent past. The days blend together, the months lurch ahead. And while so much of the pandemic's impact has landed unequally across geography, race, and class, these distortions of time feel strangely universal.”[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

However, that “strangely universal” feeling is a delusion. Coronatime varies across the demographic spectrum. Sara Lindberg summarizes a survey on perceptions of time during COVID-19 as follows:

“...higher stress levels, increasing age, reduced task load, and decreasing satisfaction with less socialization is linked to feeling a slower passage of time during the day. While younger, more socially satisfied participants seem more likely to experience time passing more quickly.”[2]

Race and class create their own COVID-19 time. In his *History of Bourgeois Perception*, Donald M. Lowe devotes an entire chapter to temporality (35–58), and anyone who has been on the clock for an hourly wage knows that capitalism insists that time is money. Learning that George Floyd had been infected by the coronavirus when Derek Chauvin used a chokehold for eight minutes and forty-six seconds to asphyxiate him brought home the fact that COVID-19 time overlapped with African American lifespans in particularly tragic ways.

Julia Kristeva certainly was not the first to point out the temporal gender divide in her essay, “Women’s Time.” Emily Apter provides her own feminist take on Kristeva’s chronology:

“... it is precisely the ‘dated’ character of Kristeva’s *temps des femmes* that matters, for it describes the anachronistic resurgence of ‘seventies theory’ in the guise of feminist theory now, itself focused on time and the politics of periodicity. Women’s time in this iteration is no longer confined to essentialist, universalist formulas of embodied cycle, reproductive measure, maternal history, ‘timeless’ ideals of femininity and feminine beauty, domestic labor, or the eventual rupture with patriarchal social and political orders. It is identified instead with rethinking (among other topics) causality and teleology; the geopolitics of periodization; ‘deep’ (transcivilizational) time; epochal historicity versus situational, contingent, or provisional eventuality; prophetic time signatures (familiar in contemporary invocations of a “communism to come”); epistemological break; psychic duration and endurance; pastness and futurity (fossil time to transfinitude); and temporal remainders. A recent collaborative project initiated by Judith Butler and provisionally titled ‘Remainders: Feminist Translations in Geopolitical Time’ indicates how time has become indispensable to feminist theory: a component that helps move fields not marked as ‘feminist’ per se (global geopolitics; translation studies) into position such that they become feminist concerns. There is then a “becoming-feminist” of time theory itself” (17).

Although written a decade ago, Apter’s observations remain timely. Confining her remarks to Kristeva’s essay, Apter, however, does not take note of the role time plays in Kristeva’s *About Chinese Women*. Mythic, dynastic, feudal, republican, socialist, matriarchal and patriarchal times struggle in her portrait of women written after a visit to Mao’s China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

When the novel coronavirus emerged in Wuhan at the end of 2019, some Chinese women marked time by chronicling the lockdown of their city. Notably, Fang



To address the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on humanities and arts research involving gender, diversity, and democracy, the Center for the Study of Globalization and Cultures (CSGC) convened a panel on this topic on June 22, 2020 via Zoom. For links to recordings of the presentations, visit <https://csgchku.wordpress.com/2020/07/13/gender-diversity-democracy-arts-and-humanities-research-during-the-covid-19-crisis-2/>



Image for *Not One Less* (dir. Kanas Liu and Sam Tsang, 2019) documents the role played by female protesters in the 2019 demonstrations.

Fang's *Wuhan Diary* originally appeared online as a *Sina Weibo* blog. However, the impact on women's time extended far beyond Wuhan, and the United Nations notes that women suffer globally:

“The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic,” stated a UN policy brief published in April 2020.”[3]

Cycles of domestic violence, overtime as essential workers in hospitals or grocery stores, home office time on Zoom or other platforms, study time with children online for school, kitchen duty with limited supplies for the newly unemployed, and the endless “second shift” shouldered by women became part of the gendered dimension of coronatime.[4] Women regress on professional ladders as journal submissions from female researchers drop and women put their careers on hold. [5]

Even though Hong Kong has escaped much of the cruelty of the pandemic, it takes its toll on women's time. Quoted in the *South China Morning Post*, Fiona Nott of Hong Kong's The Women's Foundation (TWF) says:

“Covid-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities and disproportionately impacted women and girls in disturbing new ways—from extra care work and household duties, to financial instability and a heightened risk of domestic violence...”[6]

Nott could add to this the fact that Hong Kong measures its time differently from other places, and what Richard Hughes called Hong Kong's “borrowed time” in 1968 still makes its own mark on women's lives. The colonial status of much of its territory had 1997 as an end date, and its current existence as a “Special Administrative Region” (SAR) of the People's Republic of China stops in 2047. Always looking to the future as a terminal point, Ackbar Abbas characterizes Hong Kong as “déjà disparu,” saying: “It is as if the speed of current events is producing a radical desynchronization (25–26).” In 2020, the *Journal of Future Studies* devoted an entire issue to Hong Kong's prospects.

Before the novel coronavirus appeared in 2019, Hong Kong experienced considerable disruption that year, including university closures, transportation interruptions, and teargas fallout, from the Anti-ELAB (Extradition Law Amendment Bill) protests that roiled the city for months. As activists, politicians, teachers, journalists, and medical workers, women played a key role in the demonstrations. From the initial case of the murder of a Hong Kong woman in Taiwan that inspired Chief Executive Carrie Lam to call for a sweeping extradition bill, gender played a central role in Hong Kong's 2019 protest movement.[7]



Image from *Not One Less* that underscores the particular challenges faced by women activists intimidated by reports of sexual harassment and assault in police custody.

Instances of police involvement in sexual harassment and excessive force against women protesters partially fueled one of the key demands for an independent investigation of the police, and women's time on the streets played a vital role in the strength of the movement.[8]

Protests, pandemics, and Hong Kong time on screen

Throughout its history, Hong Kong's geopolitical time has been disrupted, too, by pandemic time. As a port city connecting the empires of China and Great Britain, at the crossroads of the world, and as Asia's global city, Hong Kong acts as a conduit of goods, services, capital, ideas and disease.[9] The 1894 bubonic third plague, the 1918-20 flu, the 1938 smallpox pandemic, the 1961 cholera outbreak, and the 1968 Hong Kong flu pandemic, to name just a few diseases that also included other avian and swine influenza strains, malaria, and HIV/AIDS, among other infections, all left their mark on the territory.[10] After the end of the colonial period in 1997, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) became synonymous with severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003, and, now, COVID-19, which makes Hong Kong a sore point as it intersects with a wave of protests that started in 2019 and the intensification of international tensions because of the Sino-US trade war.

Priscilla Wald notes that pandemics give rise to "outbreak" narratives with their own temporality:

"The outbreak narrative—in its scientific, journalistic, and fictional incarnations—follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment" (2).



A key outbreak narrative on film is analyzed in Wald's book. *Contagion* (dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2011), places the adulterous corporate executive, Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow), at the epicenter of the emerging SARS-like epidemic as "Patient Zero" in Macau, a short ferry ride away from Hong Kong.

These tales have their morals as well as their allegorical significations, and Hong Kong stories follow a similar pattern with geopolitical overtones. Three pandemic moments associated with political protests left their indelible mark on Hong Kong screens. The aftermath of the 1967 anti-colonial riots overlaps with the 1968 Hong Kong flu; the 2002-3 SARS pandemic ended as the 2003 anti-Article 23 protests flared; and, the repercussions from the 2019 anti-ELAB movement linger during the COVID-19 crisis. The traumatic moments sent ripples through the cinematic imagination of Hong Kong's filmmakers and left their own marks on the ways in which motion picture time constructs historical time in political terms.



The 1968 Hong Kong flu pandemic followed closely on the 1967 anti-colonial protests and coincided with global rebellions against imperialism with the movement against the Vietnam War among them.

André Bazin noted cinema's ability to capture duration as "change mummified" (15). Drawing on Henri Bergson's musings on time and memory, Gilles Deleuze observes film's ability to capture "crystals of time" as time-images on screen. Ackbar Abbas notes that Hong Kong New Wave cinema constructs its own sense of time because of its unique geopolitical status:

"There is an important relation, then, between the new Hong Kong cinema and the *déjà disparu*: its main task is to find means of outflanking, or simply keeping pace with, a subject always on the point of disappearing..." (26).

He points to Wong Kar-wai's oeuvre, which includes *Ashes of Time* (1994), as exemplifying this, but he is not the only one. Tony Rayns crowns Wong a "poet of time," Stephen Teo calls him an "auteur of time," and Dennis Lim elevates him to "master of time." Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli see his characters as "trapped in the present." Tiffany Ng considers his style as "a meditation on time."

However, before the advent of Hong Kong's New Wave, Patrick Lung Kong wrote and directed *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (1970), loosely based on Albert Camus' 1947 novel, *The Plague*. The motion picture borrows the section headings from Richard Hughes' book, written in the wake of the 1967 unrest and published during the 1968 flu pandemic, for the title of the film that highlights the centrality of time during a plague as before (yesterday), during (today), and after (tomorrow) the outbreak. The film's plot links the anti-colonial riots of 1967 directly to a fictitious pandemic in much the same way Albert Camus used his plague as an allegory of Nazism. As Tom Cunliffe notes, the film suffered enormously from British colonial censorship because of its direct references to the 1967 unrest; however, even in truncated form, it still stands as an incisive commentary on Hong Kong at the intersection of anti-imperial protests and



Opening image of Victoria harbor in *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*.



Hong Kong personified by the figure of the female tour guide showing off the modern city.

global opprobrium because of the so-called “Hong Kong flu” pandemic.

As an outbreak narrative that implicitly links protests to a pandemic, *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* resonates with Hong Kong’s 2019-20 timeline in several striking ways. Although leftwing critics soundly criticized the film for its ostensible lack of sympathy for protesters, the film does capture in arresting detail the outbreak timeline associated with pandemics. From beginning to end, it hits on all industries, government agencies, and social issues that characterize Hong Kong’s “borrowed” time in a pandemic. Images of airplanes and ships, as well as panoramic shots of Victoria harbor, confirm the significance, too, of transportation to the territory’s economy. City bus tours bookend the film, showcasing the veneer of urban modernity on display for outsiders shattered by the ensuing epidemic.



Global brands such as Max Factor on display and defining the “look” not only of Hong Kong’s women but of middle-class aspirations in 1960s Hong Kong.



The Plover Cove reservoir was completed in 1967. After the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945 and with the success of China’s Revolution in 1949, water became a contested issue since the territory relies heavily on mainland sources. The 1963–64 water crisis, for example, was particularly severe.



A shot of public housing speaks to the shortages that continue to plague the city.



Not on the tour—Hong Kong’s squatter villages.

The tour spotlights consumer displays of global brands such as Max Factor cosmetics. A shot of a reservoir serves as a reminder of the water shortages and measures taken to ensure local supplies at the height of the Cold War. The introduction to the city includes shots of public housing built to accommodate Hong Kong’s expanding population of refugees as well as a generation that would mark the first time since the end of World War II that native-born Hong Kong people would outnumber immigrants from the mainland. Not on the tour, squatter housing points to the deep divide between the rich and the poor that plagues the city in more ways than one.

Drawing on Camus’ *The Plague*, also set in a colony, Lung Kong includes the Christian church in the narrative. Hong Kong operates on the calendar set by the British government, and the epidemic begins during the Christmas season. However, the Chinese Lunar New Year marks the end of the plague and the

conclusion of the film, which perhaps points to a postcolonial tomorrow.



The Christian church looms large in *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*.



Christmas in Hong Kong. The plague takes hold.



The Lunar New Year festival marks the end of the epidemic with a traditional lion dance.



Rats invade the sweatshop floors.

Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow shows the epidemic moving through all levels of society. Rats intrude on the factory floor of sweatshops and disease breaks out in the warehouses overflowing with holiday ornaments. Members of the informal economy populated by unlicensed taxi drivers and street vendors play a role in spreading the disease.



The sausage vendor unwittingly spreads germs because of unhygienic conditions.



Government authorities are slow to take action.



Television commercializes the rat infestation.



Television screens determine the pandemic timeline. Although subscription service dates back to the 1950s, TVB (Television Broadcasts Limited) brought free-to-air television to Hong Kong in 1967, expanding the reach and popularity of the medium.



Television turns its attention to scientists as authorities on disease.



Female scientists also play a role. Women working as tour guides, textile laborers, nurses, doctors, civil servants, police officers, and television producers also appear in the film, and the gendered impact of the epidemic goes far beyond the domestic sphere to the frontlines of combatting the disease in all sectors.

The government is slow to respond, and the media commercialize the rat infestation. Screens dominate the event, and televisual time determines the pandemic timeline. As conditions worsen, scientists take center stage as authorities. The film highlights contributions by female scientists and other professional women on the frontlines of fighting the disease, and this contributes to an impression of Hong Kong's modernity marked by more progressive roles for women. Men, however, still dominate the process and set the agenda. The colonial police guard the quarantine facility and keep the restless detainees from infecting others. However, the climactic stabbing death of one of the police guards points to the chaotic conditions of the outbreak as well as alluding to the violence associated with 1967.



Men remain at the head of the table and set the agenda.



Colonial guards at the quarantine facility (Chatham Road Detention Centre).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Left to shop for necessities during the pandemic panic, women see themselves as vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.



A lone woman as the symbol of despair.



The clouds literally part to indicate the end of the plague.

Left to scramble for basic goods with prices escalating as unscrupulous merchants take advantage of the panic, women see themselves as particularly vulnerable. A nurse becomes the first frontline healthcare worker to fall—quite literally—to the disease. In a shadowy long shot, a lone woman represents the despair before the outbreak comes under control. However, a female doctor administers the first vial of life-saving therapy, and the plague comes to a swift conclusion.

Looking back at *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* from beyond the “tomorrow” referenced in the film, the same issues define the times in 2020. Tensions with mainland China over control of resources, border controls, economic inequality, substandard housing, poor working conditions, under and unemployment, a civil service out of touch with social needs, an undemocratic government slow to respond to public sentiment, and the striking contrast between a veneer of consumer confidence and the enduring legacy of colonial inequality connect the film’s “yesterday” with Hong Kong’s “today.” The scramble for basic goods such as rice resonates with the mask and toilet paper shortages in 2020. In 2020, too, the media and scientific establishment, occasionally at odds with public sentiment, struggle to balance government intervention with the welfare of the population. The film also puts its finger on the gendered nature of the outbreak with infidelity, heterosexual romance, domestic duties, and familial hierarchies playing a role that contrasts with the film’s depiction of professional women on the frontlines in healthcare, law enforcement, the civil service, tourism, and behind the scenes in the television industries.

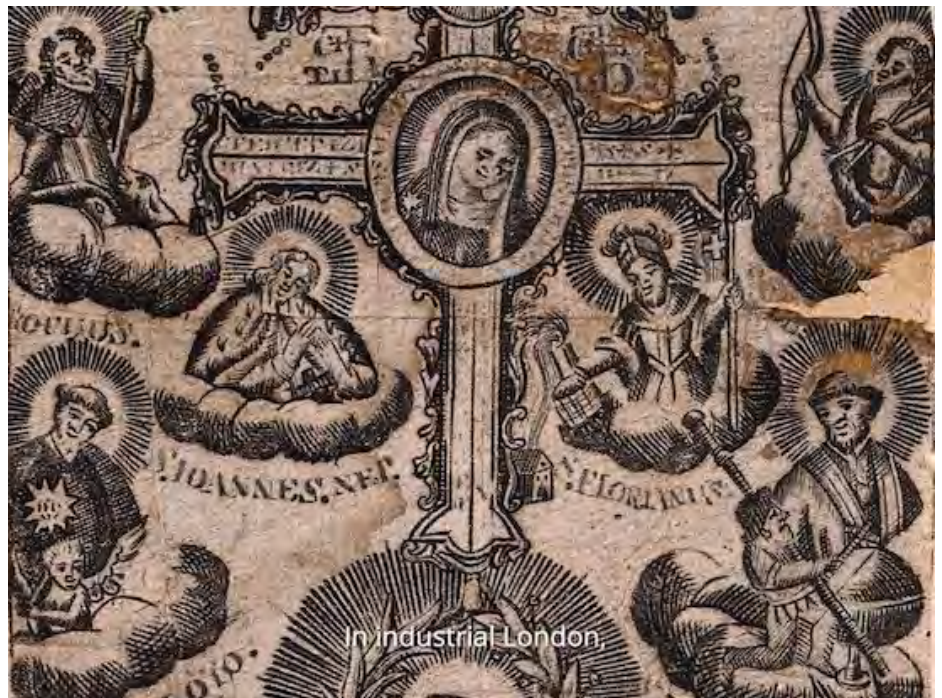
Melodramatic excess structures the plot. However, what the film presents as “irrational” violence and drug-fueled crime can be seen instead as what Martin Luther King, Jr. meant when he said, “a riot is the language of the unheard.”^[11] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The 2019 protests, too, frame the ways in which Hong Kong experiences pandemic time in 2020. While the National Security Law (NSL) enacted on July 1, 2020, and ongoing social distancing regulations make public demonstrations difficult, political tensions simmering from the 2019 protests endure. While Kong’s film promises a bright “tomorrow,” Hong Kong’s future, when its borrowed time finally runs out, remains unclear.

In the year before the 1997 Handover, Herman Yau brought pandemics back into the popular imagination with the horrific *Ebola Syndrome* (1996) in which a maniac, played by Anthony Wong, carries the virus from Africa to Hong Kong. A few years after the Handover, SARS hit Hong Kong particularly hard between March and June 2003, and 286 people died from the virus (299 in total by the end of the pandemic).^[12] (In comparison, as of October 31, 2020, 105 Hong Kong people have died from COVID-19.) The global reach of SARS inspired Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011), and the film picks up on the centrality of gender in the outbreak narrative as seen in *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. While the men eventually save the day in Soderbergh’s film, the adulterous Patient Zero, Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow), the martyred frontline healthcare worker, Dr. Erin Mears (Kate Winslet), and the kidnapped WHO representative, Dr. Leonora Orantes (Marion Cotillard), among other supporting female characters, weave women into the violence of the viral plot.

During the 2003 pandemic, the Hong Kong Information Services Department rallied some of the most illustrious directors in the film industry to contribute short pieces to an omnibus production, *1:99 Shorts* (2003). While 1:99 refers to

the bleach solution used to kill the virus rather than the time allotted to each short, duration plays a part in many of the films. Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's "A Glorious Future" stands out in this regard, since it uses archival photos to allude to Hong Kong's past disasters; its present celebrities contribute brief statements, including stars such as Eric Tsang, who at the time played a key role in Lau and Mak's *Infernal Affairs* Trilogy (2002-3), which spanned the SARS period; and, the "glorious future," to which the title refers, shines throughout.[13] Subsequent films and television shows processed Hong Kong's SARS trauma in various ways, including *Golden Chicken 2* (Samson Chiu, 2003), starring Sandra Ng as the titular prostitute, and *City of SARS* (Steve Cheng, 2003), featuring Eric Tsang, among other popular celebrities.

Massive demonstrations against the implementation of Article 23, a part of the Basic Law that calls for Hong Kong to legislate against crimes of subversion and sedition, came immediately in the wake of the SARS outbreak, reaching a crescendo on July 1, 2003. Documentary filmmaker, Tammy Cheung, chronicles the protest in her film, *July* (2004).[14] These demonstrations, which successfully stopped the implementation of Article 23, set the stage for the 2012 Scholarism Movement against national education, the 2014 Umbrella Movement, in support of universal suffrage and against attempts to limit participation in the election of the Chief Executive, and the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement, against the proposed extradition bill. July 1, the date of the Handover, remains significant, and Beijing's choice to impose the National Security Law on Hong Kong on July 1, 2020, carries symbolic significance.



Many Undulating Things visually connects empire, religion, and the imagination of disease through iconic citations such as this one of The Holy Cross with the image of the Virgin of the Ursulines at Landshut.

Although political protests remain out of the picture, Bo Wang and Pan Lu's *Many Undulating Things* (2019) devotes a section of their essay film to Hong Kong's history of disease. This section revolves around a montage of archival images that exhibits a particular sense of time when seen in relation to the HKSAR in 2020. The film does an outstanding job of linking Hong Kong's colonial history of pandemics to the flow of people and goods between the empires of Great Britain and Imperial China. The story of British explorer and botanist, Joseph Banks, becomes part of the narrative of tropical maladies and



Joseph Banks portrayed as a young gentleman in 1773.

Even before the Opium Wars, Orientalist scientists lay the foundation for imagining colonies such as Hong Kong as incubators for disease.



Kew Gardens, near the imperial center of London, serves as a repository of the flora collected throughout the empire as well as evidence of Britain's power to reorganize nature in the image of the global hierarchy it created.



Picturing British colonial times. Staffordshire Regiment cleaning plague houses, Hong Kong.

racist imagery associated with colonial expansion as seen in the establishment of Kew Gardens, which pays tribute to the power of imperial science to uproot and exhibit horticultural bounty from across the continents.

In another scene, the filmmakers reflect on their own production of cinematic images about Orientalism and biological science. The camera operator and gaffer set up a shot of a bust of Carl von Linné (Carl Linnaeus). This brings the pandemic past into the same frame with the cinematic present and makes an implicit connection between Linnaeus' racial taxonomy of human beings ("melancholic yellow Asiatics" as one of his four groups of humans) and his work on plant and human diseases. Although not mentioned in the film, Linnaeus' scientific research extended into the question of time. Fascinated by the rhythms of plants, he created a floral clock that bloomed to mark the time of day and night. Of course, time has a racial dimension as well with the "primitive" trapped in the past and the "civilized" at the top of the colonial hierarchy marking progress based on the science of chronology.

The pseudo-science behind many of these theories of race and disease becomes a key theme in this section of the film. In the 19th century, for example, the germ theory competed with the notion of miasma as an explanatory model. This science leads to colonial practices that discipline the local populations. Moving into the twentieth century and the Cold War, the film cites a Hollywood production, *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King, 1955), which likely inspired the title for *Many Undulating Things*.



In my book on the depiction of interracial romance in American cinema, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, I analyze the Henry King film, based on Han Suyin's 1952 semi-autobiographical account of her life as a Eurasian medical doctor in Hong Kong. It chronicles life in the colony in the wake of China's civil war between the Communist and Nationalist forces and the buildup to the Korean War as refugees pour across the porous border between Hong Kong and mainland China. In the film, Jennifer Jones plays Dr. Han and William Holden portrays her married lover, Mark Elliot, an American journalist based in Asia.

Bo Wang and Pan Lu cite this romantic melodrama in order to support their argument linking racism, medical science, and disease in the Euro-American popular imagination. In order to presage the tragic end to their illicit love affair, *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, as Bo Wang and Pan Lu point out, goes to great pains to create the impression of oppressive humidity, implying unhygienic conditions.



In *Romance and the "Yellow Peril,"* I argue that Anglo-American men serve as "white knights" in Cold War romances in order to "save" Asian women from their own foibles as well as from both the strictures of British colonialism and the threat of Chinese Communism. Jennifer Jones and William Holden pictured here as Mark Elliott comes to the "rescue" of Han Suyin by retrieving her misplaced objects.



Hollywood affirms assumptions about race and disease. Although the abandoned refugee girl pictured here was hit by a car and not by a pandemic, an earlier scene, not shown in *Many Undulating Things*, confirms that Dr. Han also routinely treats indigent patients who suffer from infectious illnesses.



Bo Wang and Pan Lu point to details of the mise-en-scene, including lighting, set design, and makeup, that contribute to the impression of tropical humidity in the dry California heat.

The Hollywood film technicians used lighting techniques to imitate shadows cast by overhead mechanical fans and key lights to indicate sweat in the dry heat of the Southern Californian studio in which much of the film was shot. Moreover, both *Contagion* and *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* set parts of their stories in Portuguese Macau, associated with even less hygienic and more "primitive" relationships to death and disease than British Hong Kong.

Many Undulating Things quotes the conclusion of *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* in which Elliott bids farewell to Han, cutting between a view of Hong Kong's cityscape and a small hillock in California, the couple's favorite trysting spot. In his discussion of Hong Kong temporality, Ackbar Abbas talks about Hong Kong in late colonial times as "love at last sight," (23) and this Hollywood image of the barren tree and tiny figure of a woman seen from a distance encapsulates that sentiment.



Mark Elliott waving farewell against the backdrop of Hong Kong's cityscape.



Han Suyin dwarfed by the wide angle, long shot of the landscape, illustrating Ackbar Abbas' notion of "love at last sight."

In 1968, Richard Hughes poses this concluding question in *Hong Kong: Borrowed Place, Borrowed Time*:

"The real, final question is: how much is Hong Kong worth? And to whom? It is a good question, especially about a borrowed place still living on borrowed time...Whatever happens, it is a question which the Chinese will answer in their own time and in their own way" (171).

Hughes does not mention that the answer had been coming for decades: the 1967 riots synchronized with the Cultural Revolution; the 1968 flu spread with US troops fighting in Vietnam; the 2002–3 SARS epidemic coming from Guangdong animal markets across the border; Article 23 an unfinished part of the Basic Law negotiated as part of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration; the 2019 protests

opposed to sending Hong Kong residents to the PRC to face trial; the 2020 novel coronavirus first isolated in Wuhan; and, the National Security Law (NSL) imposed on Hong Kong without consultation on July 1, 2020. Article 9 of the NSL mentions strengthening “regulation” of universities among other institutions with regards to national security, and Article 10 directs universities to “raise awareness” about the law, placing college instructors on a new timeline in relation to the law’s enactment.

Teaching online on Hong Kong time

Because of the 2019 protests, the universities in Hong Kong went online for several weeks before the novel coronavirus swept across the border and put classes back online after the Lunar New Year in 2020.[15] Teachers in Hong Kong, therefore, were veterans of remote instruction months before the world embraced distance learning because of COVID-19. Higher education instructors mark their time in academic years, semesters, trimesters, and quarters, reading weeks, spring breaks, office hours, credit hours, classroom timetables, course schedules, due dates of assessments, examination periods, and the cutoff for final grades. While the protests threw Hong Kong teachers off schedule, COVID-19 put us all on a completely new timetable to accommodate students in different time zones, working under challenging conditions at all hours, trying to keep track of learning outcomes in order to ensure the credit hours tallied up. Teaching changed from classroom instruction to live streaming, video capture, webinars, learning management systems, online forums, social media posts, and the inevitable and endless emails.



Offering a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), *Hong Kong Cinema through a Global Lens*, our teaching team, including my fellow instructors Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park and Staci Ford, have been following our own remote teaching schedules since February 2017 when we launched the MOOC on the non-profit edX platform.[16] Staci Ford and I also contribute to another University of Hong Kong MOOC, *Doing Gender and Why It Matters*, also on edX.[17] We routinely use our MOOCs in our face-to-face classes to expand online discussion beyond Hong Kong by including the MOOC learners from other parts of the world[18] as well as by using our pre-recorded lectures and digital quizzes to “flip” our classrooms so that lecture time on campus can be kept to a minimum.





MOOC learners mark themselves on a world map. They have the option to introduce themselves as well.





Originally designed to push back against elitism in higher education somewhat ironically inaugurated by professors working at Ivy League institutions, MOOCs have fallen short of much of their initial promise. For example, the lack of access to reliable Internet connections and physical computers maintains a digital wall that keeps many potential learners from taking advantage of MOOCs. Given they are, by definition, not credit-bearing also makes them unattractive to students who need meaningful credentials to further their careers. Institutions, such as the University of Hong Kong, provide content with a small percentage of the revenue going back to the college (not the instructor, who may be compensated in other ways such as a reduced teaching load). Partnerships with MOOC providers help these universities expand into online education globally without justifying the costs to the state and national governments that fund them to provide research and teaching primarily for local students. While many institutions such as the University of Maryland have run robust remote degree programs for decades, most institutions have little incentive to move their programs online. Arizona State University, under the leadership of Michael Crow, has been an exception, and the trend may shift.[19]

However, the MOOC model differs, since its course design favors “stackable” units of six weeks or less, mechanized quizzes, and peer assessments rather than more conventional assignments and direct involvement of instructors with evaluation of student progress. Even though the content comes at no direct cost to the MOOC platform companies, they do not have a steady revenue stream guaranteed by tuition, endowments, or state funding. Because of their parasitic relationship to private and public higher education, most MOOC providers, such as the for-profit Coursera and the non-profit edX, have modified their initial mission and moved into more traditional models for online degree programs. These companies now provide “micro” degrees that can be parlayed into college credit. So, these platform providers move into the territory previously occupied by “open” colleges and universities, providing remote education to students outside of traditional admissions systems for a reduced fee rather than offering completely free and open access to higher education.

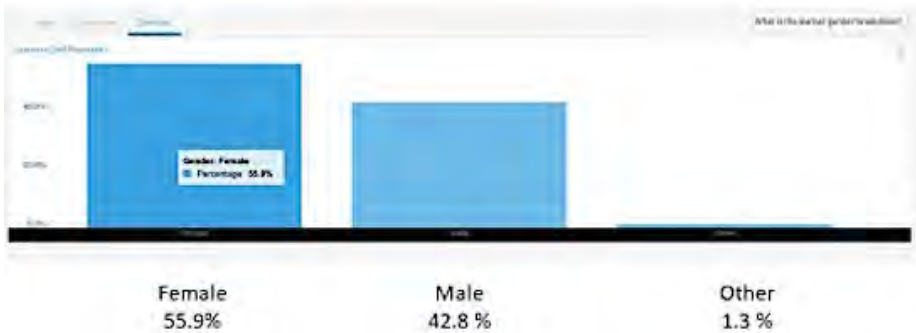
JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Seeing *Hong Kong Cinema through a Global Lens* as a course “taster,” I had high hopes for using the MOOC to attract great students to HKU, assisting other teachers with their Hong Kong film offerings by providing content based on our research, and using it as a short course to help train graduate students new to the field. Looking at it as a digital textbook, in many ways, I, of course, also wanted to attract undergraduate students in need of inspiration and Hong Kong film fans. My grand plans extended to creating teams of colleagues bringing their students to the MOOC to enrich my own students’ education, and, in some rhizomatic fashion, cultivating a collective of film teachers picking lectures, readings, quizzes, and related course materials from a cornucopia of MOOC offerings. Most MOOC learners, in fact, are not students enrolled in degree programs. Rather, other teachers and “lifelong” learners, many with postgraduate degrees, form the bulk of the MOOC virtual student body.

Teaching on MOOC time also brings to the surface the question of gender in relation to time and education. Men dominate the MOOC universe and set its chronology through short courses with six weekly topics, ten-minute mini-lectures, and roughly an hour in total of instructional time for each unit. Originally designed by educators working in STEM, the fact that men set the MOOC clock comes as no surprise when these fields continue to struggle with enormous gender imbalances. One article, in fact, calls MOOCs “masculine open online courses.” [20] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Given that most people who even know about the existence of MOOCs work in STEM fields, it did come as a bit of surprise when *Hong Kong Cinema through a Global Lens* attracted an evenly divided initial cohort of women and men. Although Hong Kong cinema, particularly outside of Asia, conjures up images of “fan boys” and macho-martial arts aficionados as its principal viewers, most researchers know that Hong Kong film has always had a broad appeal. Given all three of the key teachers of *Hong Kong Cinema through a Global Lens* work on gender issues, the consistently gender-balanced composition of learners seemed to reflect the course’s pedagogical emphasis on questions of masculinity, women filmmakers, gender identity in diaspora, and related issues. In Fall 2020, this changed, and the course attracted substantially more female than male learners.

Gender



Gender breakdown, Fall 2020.

When thinking about women's time during the pandemic, the flexibility of the asynchronous MOOC may alleviate some of the stress associated with the second and third shifts female students routinely encounter with being at home with children and/or parents, jobs outside the home, moves between campus dorms and other living arrangements, and/or the pressures of being alone and isolated during a major health crisis. Pushed to use the MOOC by the rapid move online seemed to be in synch with the needs of these female learners.

Although not as "open" to nontraditional students as I would prefer, MOOCs fulfill a function and still have the potential to increase access to higher education to underserved groups at no cost to learners. Universities expand their reputations, and students get a free "trial run" of a variety of disciplines across institutions. MOOCs can expand interest in subjects unavailable at some colleges as well as help students navigate higher education remotely before committing to a degree program. However, while they can supplement degree programs, they are not designed to replace online for-credit programs or remote credit-bearing courses.

The rapid change to remote teaching and learning put MOOCs in the spotlight because of COVID-19.[21] In pandemic times, higher education commentators see MOOCs as having their moment.[22] Many platform providers, including Coursera and edX, opened up courses that had been placed behind paywalls, but with certain conditions. In the case of *Hong Kong Cinema through a Global Lens*, edX opened elements of the course that had been limited to learners working for a verified certificate requiring a fee. Our team also agreed to switch gears and, after our regular instructor-led offering finished, keep the course open as learner-paced. This transformed the scheduling of the course. Normally, we open each unit up once a week for a total of six weeks with some additional time given for students to finish up assessments. We cap each week with a round-up video that addresses student comments from the online forum as well as any updates on course topics. However, switching over to learner-pacing meant that all units remained open, no weekly videos were provided, and students navigated the course without a set schedule. As with many forms of remote learning, the added convenience given to the students meant less engagement with the teaching team and a weaker sense of having a cohort of peers engaged with the same material at the same time. As we all know, time and pedagogy are intimately connected, and the pandemic makes this crystal clear to all teachers scrambling to structure the

time spent with their students.



Ria Sinha with Gina Marchetti in conversation with comments from MOOC learners for a roundup video on *Contagion*.

In the Spring 2020 term, we highlighted Hong Kong's screen connection to outbreak films such as *Contagion* in our round-up videos. Given the University of Hong Kong boasts key researchers in medical humanities, I turned immediately to my colleagues for support, and, luckily, Ria Sinha, who specializes in epidemics (principally, malaria), agreed to make two appearances to discuss media depictions of the novel coronavirus. We also took on board a local secondary school, Li Po Chun United World College, which includes film studies as part of its International Baccalaureate (IB) program.



Students and teachers at Li Po Chun United World College of Hong Kong also participated in the MOOC as a formal part of their program.

One Li Po Chun teacher, Linda Olson, who had studied in the Master of Arts in Literary and Cultural Studies (MALCS) program at HKU and written a thesis on Bruce Lee, invited MOOC learners to share their personal experiences watching

martial arts films with her on the forum.

[Linda LPC UWC HK] Extending the Question to international audiences

discussion posted by LindaTZ

I grew up in Tanzania, East Africa, and went to school in neighboring Kenya in the 70s (actually, 1964-1981), and would like to touch on the reach of Kung Fu films, and especially Bruce Lee into the cinema markets and imaginations there. I can distinctly remember schoolmates and members of the public 'playfighting' martial arts style. In addition, I doubt there was a radio station or disco that wasn't playing Carl Douglas', "E[verybody was Kung Fu Fighting]!". Bruce Lee embodied a refusal to give in to racist colonial narratives of the inferiority of 'people of color'. Hearing it still brings a smile to my face. Additionally, the US Civil rights movement had been a partner to and inspiration of independence movements on the continent (and elsewhere). My father told me that when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, a seminary student wrote, "Our King is Dead" on the community announcements board. These connections are one of the reasons I was so interested in Bruce Lee and the Kung Fu film phenomenon. Wondering what personal associations my colleagues and students (and others) have with Bruce Lee and Kung Fu films - hope you'll share with me here. :-) Finally, I do not think the combination of commercialization and social critique is hypocritical or problematic in and of itself. The expectation that the arts and cinema must be altruistic in nature is purist. However, it would be good if communities shown to be marginalized in the critiques directly benefit from some of the profits...

A Li Po Chun United teacher writes on the MOOC forum: "Wondering what personal associations my colleagues and students (and others) have with Bruce Lee and Kung Fu films—hope you'll share with me here."

In Fall 2020, Frances Gateward, California State University Northridge, who had participated in the MOOC previously, joined us with her students. Cindy Wong, College of Staten Island/CUNY, also joined us with students from her Global Media course.[23] In fact, Cindy Wong appeared in our round-up video on Mabel Cheung's *An Autumn's Tale*. The film's New York City setting gave us an opportunity to talk about Hong Kong-New York connections and changing perceptions of the city's Chinatown in light of the pandemic crisis and an increase in incidents of racial violence because of the putative origin of the virus in China.



Zoom conversation on Mabel Cheung's *An Autumn's Tale* with Gina Marchetti, Staci Ford, and Cindy Wong.

Zoom brought us together across time zones to talk about the past of Hong Kong cinema in the present crisis.

Punctuated by these moments of teaching collaboration across continents and institutional divides, the MOOC came to life in profoundly unanticipated ways when we completely switched to online teaching. Having the MOOC in place with all the bugs worked out long before the crisis meant more time to devote to restructuring synchronous activities (e.g., Zoom sessions). In fact, merging the asynchronous MOOC forum with synchronous Zoom interactions that allowed for students to express themselves visually (on camera/shared screen), verbally (microphone on), in smaller groups (breakout rooms), and in written form (private and public chat function) opened up possibilities for students previously reluctant to participate. For example, Staci Ford observes: "...in the history and film course I do think that students were more inclined to speak up in Zoom chats because they'd been sharing insights on the MOOC forum chat." [24]

Linda Olson notices some striking features involving MOOC and Zoom time for her secondary school students. For example, going online changed the nature of class discussion:

"Shyer students who would not normally speak in class [were] able to 'take time' to form their words without having to compete with 'quick responders'—[which] allowed their classmates to see their value as resources within the classroom in a way that may not have happened, or would have taken longer to happen, or would have taken more socio-engineering to happen in a f2f format... The confidence built from this meant that during Zoom lesson follow ups / round ups—they were more likely to speak—so *synchronous* discussions were bettered."

Linda Olson kindly shared some thoughts from her students as well, including this example:

"Being someone who values and loves class discussions, I was not completely sure if I would find an online course engaging and interesting. To my surprise, I did not only find it extremely engaging due to the interviews and 'food for thought' discussions where I could read the opinions of my peers and contribute my own perspective but I also learnt many things regarding Hong Kong Cinema."

Olson also notes that the MOOC provided practice opportunities for students who needed additional support. The quizzes built confidence, but the peer-assessed short essays did more, since they provided: "...motivation to do well, because not only writing for peers, but also for others (unknown) within the MOOC." Using a rubric to evaluate essays written by their MOOC peers opened their eyes to how they could improve their own film analyses. Olson goes on to note:

"Having gained a theoretical framework for discussion of film as texts—several students have chosen to do their coursework (a 1500 word essay) on one of the films featured in the MOOC (or another film). Others have decided they will write an Extended Essay (4000) words on a film(s). I feel so happy about this."

While students at HKU and Li Po Chun can thrive online, many students struggle with online learning. Cellphones are poor substitutes for desktop computers with decent cameras and microphones. Finding any time in a pandemic to concentrate on new educational technologies can be beyond the reach of students juggling childcare, eldercare, jobs, and the added time needed simply to buy necessities during lockdowns. Time does not stand still even when asynchronous options

make virtually attending a lecture possible at any time. Even before the pandemic, my favorite MOOC moments came when I could interact with my students in class using the MOOC platform to help them engage with international peers. The asynchronous/synchronous teaching rhythm helped me as a teacher face the challenges of pandemic time, and adjusting to a completely asynchronous mode for remote campus courses would have been difficult.

Beyond the virtual classroom, Hong Kong's borrowed time created its own anxieties and obstacles. As the National Security Law came into play, the academic freedom of teachers and students emerged as a salient issue. Digital platforms provide little security for academic conversations that may push the boundaries of what can and cannot be uttered.[25] Students want recordings for review, but they are reluctant to engage in conversations that may drift into politics. Teachers find cameras intrusive, and some fear their videos may be used to terminate their employment. Others insist students turn on their cameras and show their faces with little regard for their privacy or the feelings of others who may share their domestic space. Hong Kong takes its culture out into the world through online courses such as *Hong Kong Cinema through a Global Lens*, but it also opens itself up to possible censure for hosting conversations that may violate the new NSL law.

Conclusion: turning back the corona clock

In the wake of the pandemic, the debate between temporary and more lasting changes to our sense of time rages across fields. Students face a different digital future, and film teachers must acclimate. Cinematic time bends to conform to streaming services and online film festivals. Televisual temporality expands to accommodate the webinar and the Zoom room in its news and entertainment cycles. Teaching face-to-face encompasses flipped, hybrid, and hyflex modes with their own synchronous and asynchronous components, and fully online divides its time into zones of activities and different senses of temporality linked to various software options. New pedagogies follow the times and may offer different ways to assess the pace of learning, progress in an academic program, and intellectual growth. The relative value of these changes in time has yet to be determined. Whether the transformation will take us away from neoliberal privatization and expand on free and open access to higher education remains to be seen. Felix Ringel talks about pausing the “clock of capitalism” as follows:

“Because the corona crisis has allowed us to experience a very different time, it will be interesting to see whether parts of this new normality, such as home offices and reduced mobility, will remain. But even if it is just an involuntary pause from capitalist times, we should reconsider neoliberalism’s temporal regimes of growth, decline and acceleration that have shaped life on Earth.”

Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine*, of course, tells a different story of crises leading to increased privatization of public resources, authoritarianism, and less robust democratic institutions. Coronatime pauses the clock for some, but accelerates decline for many others facing unemployment, violence, and greater inequality.

MOOCs stand at this crossroads. They can maintain a vision of open and inclusive education or opt for the monetization of micro-degrees, skills-based certifications, and parasitic relationships with established universities. The digital past, present, and future contains contradictions, and it is up to us to grasp all the progressive possibilities that we can. Hong Kong and its cinema balance, too, on these shifting sands, continuing on borrowed time to stimulate the global imagination of “tomorrow” at the end of coronatime.

Notes

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to members of the MOOC teaching team including Staci Ford and Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, Linda Olson and the teachers at Li Po Chun, Frances Gateward, Cindy Wong, TELI, Georgina Challen, and Louis Lu Yu. Funding came, in part, from a GRF (General Research Fund) award, "Gendered Screens, Chinese Dreams: Women Filmmakers and the Rise of China in the Twenty-First Century," Research Grants Council, Hong Kong, 2019-2021. (HKU17612818). My own "borrowed" time at the University of Hong Kong comes to an end with the completion of my contract in June 2022. Many thanks to all my HKU students and colleagues for all the wonderful years, and I dedicate this essay to them.

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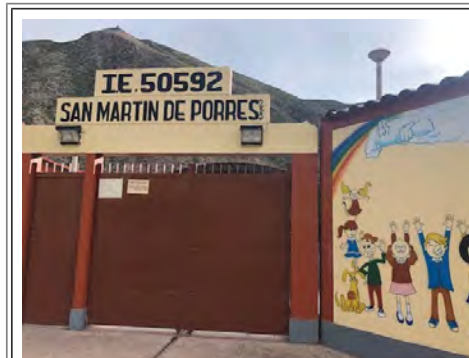
Soldier patrolling the street to enforce mask wearing and social distancing. Yuca, Peru. Photo Gabriela Martínez.

Mapping the promises and perils of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic: Peru's case.

by [Gabriela Martinez](#) and [Keya Saxena](#)

Education under the pandemic

On March 16th 2020, the government of Peru ordered its borders closed due to COVID-19, along with a series of other decrees, such as instructing people to stay at home, imposing curfews, and requiring the use of masks or protective face shields. These decrees brought the country to a grinding halt. The government deployed the army and police to patrol streets, making sure people complied with the orders. The pandemic reached Peru as summer was winding down and students getting ready to return to school. However, as COVID-19 raged like wildfire across the world in the early months of 2020, schools in the northern hemisphere shut down to discourage the spread of the infection. In the southern hemisphere most governments, including Peru's, ordered that schools, about to open, remain closed.



Above: Closed elementary school San Martin de Porres, Yuca. Photo Gabriela Martínez.

Right: Empty grounds across of the elementary school. Yuca, Peru.



.... During a normal school year, students use these grounds during class breaks and for sports. Under the pandemic the municipality has closed off the grounds and restricted all types of congregation at this public space. Photo Gabriela Martinez.

In less than a year, education and how students learn have been drastically transformed. Due to the pandemic, over 1.2 billion children have been out of classrooms worldwide (Li & Lalani, 2020). In Latin America over 150 million primary, secondary, and college students have been attending school remotely from home (Garcia Jaramillo, 2020; di Gropello, 2020). To continue education during these unprecedented times, Peru as well as other Latin American countries



Open market in a plaza to avoid indoor agglomerations. Yucay, Peru. Photo Gabriela Martínez.

have incorporated more e-learning platforms for distance education[1][[open endnotes and references in new window](#)] in. And this use of the e-learning platforms in the region is often combined with that of legacy media—radio and television.

Prior to the pandemic, many educational technology (EdTech) firms were delivering educational content through digital technology, but the pandemic accelerated these platforms' adoption around the world. In 2019, global investment in EdTech was around 18.66 billion USD which is now projected to reach 350 billion USD by 2025 (Li & Alani, 2020). Peru's 2020 fiscal budget for education was about 4% of its GDP, including monies for improving physical infrastructures and expanding the acquisition of digital technologies (ChannelNewsPeru.com, January 20, 2020), leading the government to increase its education budget by 2.83 % for 2021, especially due to the pandemic (Minedu, 2021).

COVID-19 has propelled active adoption of e-learning platforms, applications, and legacy media for education, and it has forced governments to pay close attention not only to the health crisis in their countries but the educational crisis as well. One of the biggest questions facing governments, students, teachers and parents is what the consequences of the pandemic will be in terms of education in many countries, particularly those already suffering from learning poverty.[2] In this article we will discuss various efforts in the education sector for coping with the pandemic through digital platforms combined with legacy media. Emphasizing trends, insights and lessons in Latin America, we deliberate on Peru as a case study.



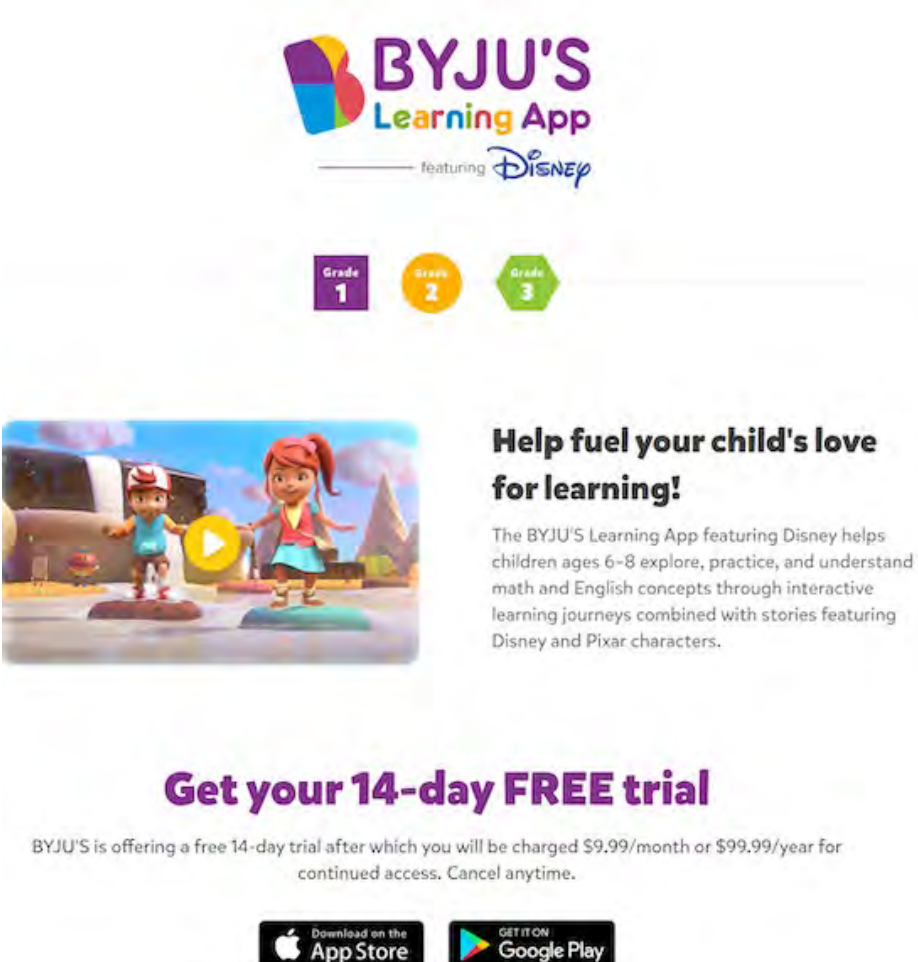
With Peru's schools closed because of the coronavirus pandemic, students like Delia Huamani, 10, learn at home by watching educational broadcasts. (Marco Garro for *The New York Times*).

We based the article primarily on our observations on the ground in Peru from March 2020 to January 2021. There's little literature about the new use of digital platforms and technologies combined with legacy media for mass education, although some data is beginning to emerge. Reports from world organizations

like UNESCO, World Bank, UNICEF, CEPAL, and a few other groups are surfacing. Thus we hope to contribute to an emerging body of information by analyzing trends and patterns in how Latin American countries, especially Peru, are now using technologies for educational praxis. We want to develop concepts to can help us better understand the gains and challenges of distance education during this health crises and into the future.

Global overview of education technologies under the pandemic

As educational institutions prepared to meet the increasing demand of distance education, numerous learning platforms began to offer free access to their content, such as BYJU'S—an educational technology firm based out of Bangalore, which is now the world's most highly valued EdTech company in the world (Warrier, 2019). As soon as it announced free live sessions on its Think and Learn app, its number of new students shot up by 200%.



The advertisement for the BYJU'S Learning App features a clean, white background. At the top, the app's logo is displayed, consisting of a colorful 'B' icon followed by the text 'BYJU'S Learning App' and 'featuring Disney' in a script font. Below the logo, three circular buttons labeled 'Grade 1', 'Grade 2', and 'Grade 3' are arranged horizontally. A central image shows two cartoon children, a boy and a girl, standing on a path with a large yellow play button in the middle. To the right of this image, a text block reads: 'Help fuel your child's love for learning! The BYJU'S Learning App featuring Disney helps children ages 6-8 explore, practice, and understand math and English concepts through interactive learning journeys combined with stories featuring Disney and Pixar characters.' Below this, a large purple headline states 'Get your 14-day FREE trial'. A smaller text block explains the trial offer: 'BYJU'S is offering a free 14-day trial after which you will be charged \$9.99/month or \$99.99/year for continued access. Cancel anytime.' At the bottom, there are two buttons for downloading the app: 'Download on the App Store' and 'GET IT ON Google Play'.

BYJU'S Learning App
featuring Disney

Grade 1 Grade 2 Grade 3

Help fuel your child's love for learning!

The BYJU'S Learning App featuring Disney helps children ages 6-8 explore, practice, and understand math and English concepts through interactive learning journeys combined with stories featuring Disney and Pixar characters.

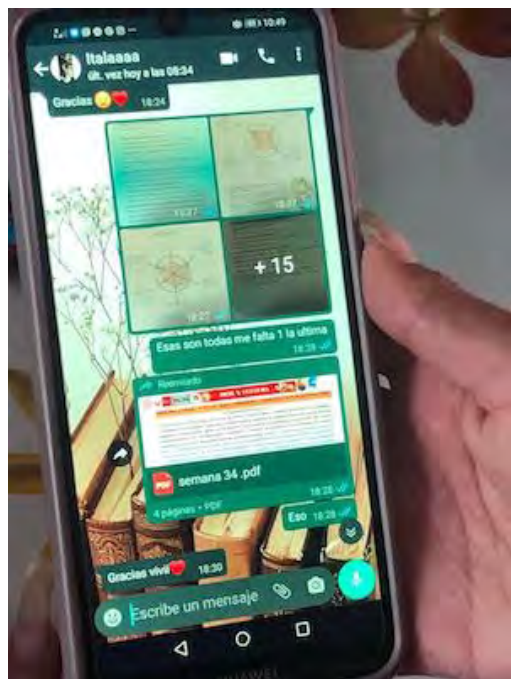
Get your 14-day FREE trial

BYJU'S is offering a free 14-day trial after which you will be charged \$9.99/month or \$99.99/year for continued access. Cancel anytime.

Download on the App Store GET IT ON Google Play

Website screenshot of BYJU'S Learning App- now the world's most highly valued EdTech company.

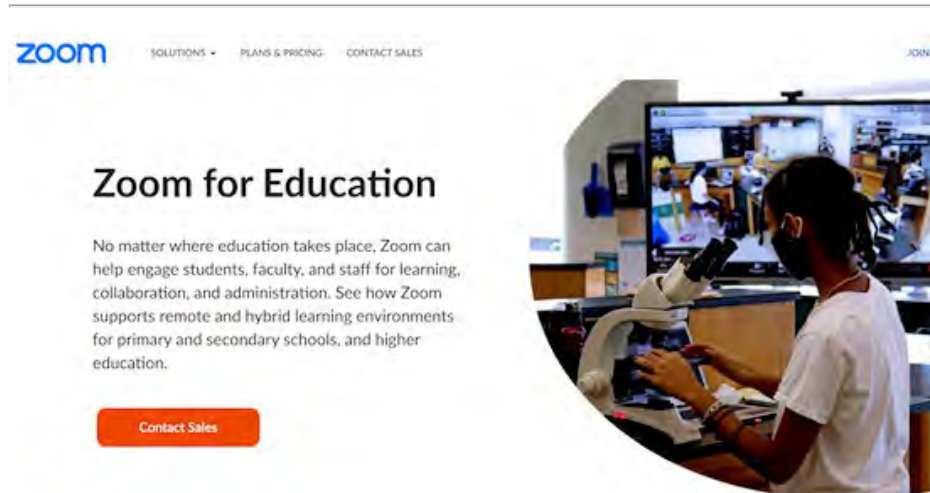
In China, after the government ordered a lockdown in early February, around 81% of K-12 students were attending classes via Tencent classroom in Wuhan, another e-learning platform that offers online courses in coding, languages and various hobbies (Li & Lalani, 2020). To support the online expansion, DingTalk, Alibaba's distance learning enterprise, used Alibaba Cloud in March 2020 to deploy around 100,000 cloud servers in only two hours (Chou, 2020). And as online companies bolstered their digital capacities, Singapore- based collaboration Lark, originally



Highschool group assignment shared via WhatsApp. This is how students in their last year of high school in Urubamba, Peru, engaged between them to complete work. Photo Gabriela Martínez.

developed by ByteDance as an internal platform, started to offer its services of unlimited video conferencing, translation and co-editing projects to students and teachers, and rapidly propped up its global servers and infrastructural engineering to bolster reliable connectivity (Li & Lalani, 2020).

Since April 2020 in the United States, Latin America and some European countries, Zoom, an application designed for videocalls, has become one of the most used communication platforms for distance teaching, working, and socializing. According to the BBC (2 June 2020), at its peak Zoom had 300 million customers utilizing the app. Many educational institutions have accounts with Zoom to facilitate class meetings and interactions between colleagues. Zoom provides the “host” the ability for screen sharing, creating breakout rooms, controlling microphones, admitting people into the virtual space and removing unwanted visitors, thus constituting a seemingly ideal video-conference platform for education. However, issues of security breaches and data privacy riddled Zoom for a while as people were grappling to find the most suitable online platform to communicate. Despite the controversy, Zoom remains one of the most used videoconferencing tools used for education.



Educators did not restrict themselves to professional education platforms but turned to social media and creatively used it to share short videos of their lessons. For instance, TikTok was used as an informal source of learning content where teachers shared bite-size snippets of teaching, feedback on assignments, motivational speeches, and simply showed the students their coping mechanisms (Ketchell, 2020). WhatsApp turned out to be a useful platform for education in countries like Peru, India and Ghana where it was easily accessible and did not need extensive digital training. It was already used by masses.

In fact, even prior to the pandemic, WhatsApp was incorporated into education, although experimentally, in some of Peru's public schools where teachers were using it for improving oral and writing competencies (Escobar-Mamani and Gómez-Arteta, 2020). Then, after its extensive proliferation as an education tool,

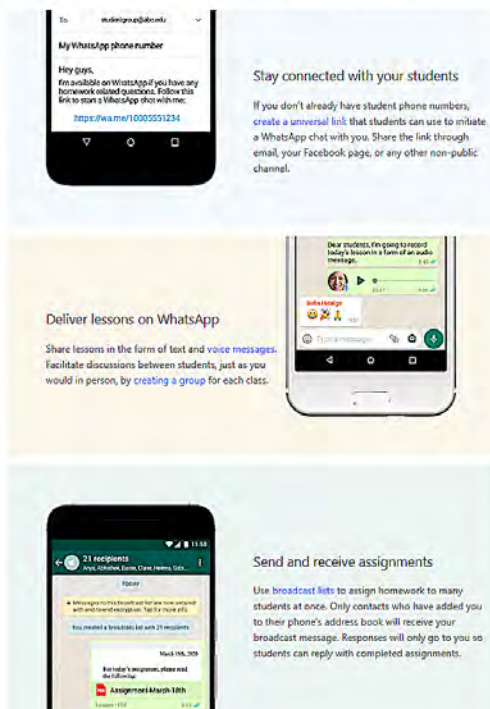
How WhatsApp can help you stay connected during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Educators

Whether you teach at a school or university, consider engaging with your students on WhatsApp if schooling is disrupted.*

Please use WhatsApp responsibly while connecting with your customers. Only communicate with users you know and those who wish to receive messages from you, ask customers to save your phone number in their address book, and avoid sending automated or promotional messages to groups. Not following these simple best practices could result in complaints from other users and possibly an account ban.

If you are new to WhatsApp, [click here](#) for a step-by-step guide on how to get started.



WhatsApp Coronavirus Information Hub explains the ways of staying connected, especially for educators. [Click here to see full size.](#)

this Facebook subsidiary rolled out resources for educators that included tips on engagement strategies, assignment feedback, and group activities among many other features (WhatsApp, 2020).

Additionally, to facilitate educating ongoing classes via an interesting and personalized pedagogical method, school districts established partnerships for broadcasting local educational segments; they teamed up with different media channels catering to different ages, classes and digital platforms. For instance, BBC launched Bitesize Daily that collaborated with subject specialists, teachers and celebrities to teach students in the UK. David Attenborough was roped in to teach about oceans and the natural world, Manchester city footballer Sergio Agüero used football to teach counting in Spanish and award winning musicians Mabel and Liam Payne tried out combinations of music and reading for students in secondary school (BBC, 20 April 2020). Peru's Ministry of Education hired actress Patricia Barreto to help hosting the televised programs developed for secondary school as part of the Aprendo en Casa (I Learn at Home) team (Aguilar, 7 de Abril, 2020). Other less resource-intensive solutions, yet no less creative, were abundant as schools and governments scrambled to switch from in-person to distance mode of education. For instance, a school in Nigeria deployed plain asynchronous learning tools such as reading material and supplemented it with synchronous face-to-face video teaching (Tam & Al-Azar, 2020).

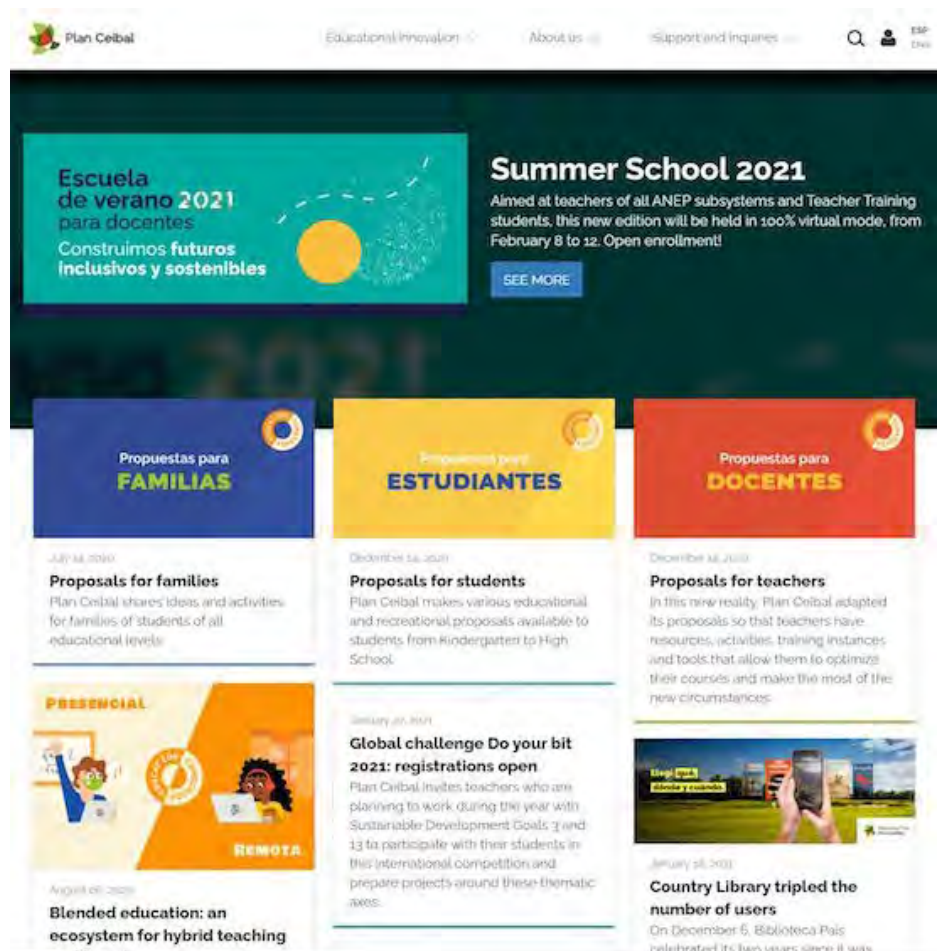
Education trends in Latin America in the pandemic

Since the countries of Latin America are heterogenous, we cannot generalize their diverse educational landscapes, technological adoptions, or learning challenges that span throughout the region. Adopting information and communication technologies (ICTs) for education, especially online platforms, has been uneven, but several countries in the region have striven to improve and expand its access, such as [Plan Ceibal](#) in Uruguay, [Plan Huascarán](#) in Peru, [3] [Conectar Igualdad](#) in Argentina, [Enlace](#) in Chile and [Fundación Omar Dengo](#) in Costa Rica (Tedesco, 2016). However, those initiatives obviously did not consider planning for a pandemic situation in which over 150 million primary, secondary, and college students would be attending school remotely from home (García Jaramillo, 2020; di Gropello, 2020).

In the time since the pandemic reached the region back in March 2020, most countries in the region have implemented various types of measures to meet students' learning needs—while most schools remained closed throughout the school year. Countries swiftly implemented a variety of strategies, some based on their own previous models that included use of radio and television; others incorporated online platforms and cellular phones (García Jaramillo, 2020; Pais, 24 April 2020; di Gropello, 01 June, 2020). Although most teachers are familiar with using the Internet and some ICTs in the classroom, teaching long distance through online platforms, ICTs, and cell phones was new to most. That situation forced teachers across the region to enhance their technological knowledge overnight, and to learn how to creatively deliver educational content through digital platforms. Based on individual countries' long standing and pre-pandemic initiatives, some countries outperformed others. For instance, the World Bank lauded Uruguay, Chile, Mexico, and Colombia in tackling distance education

efficiently (Pais, 24 de Abril 2020).

In 2007, Uruguay created [Plan Ceibal](#) to promote inclusion and equity in education through new technologies across the country. [Plan Ceibal](#) offers access to a computer and free Internet to every student at elementary and secondary levels in all public schools. In addition, it offers educators a variety of improvement programs and professional development opportunities for enhancing their teaching using virtual platforms (Plan Ceibal). The program has various platforms for in-class instruction and long-distance learning. For instance, one of its platforms, CREA, acts as an education social network that aids course management, distribution, collaborating materials with students and teachers, grading homework, and connecting with students for school-related conversations. The other platforms of Ceibal, PAM and Matific assist in teaching math, with the latter using gamification for math learning and teaching, especially for early learners ranging from kindergarten to 6th grade (Plan Ceibal).



Website screenshot of Plan Ceibal, an online educational platform for students in Uruguay.

Similarly, a decade ago Chile implemented access to digital platforms for enhancing the educational experience. The country's government offers two digital platforms for distance learning— [Aprendo en línea](#) and [Aptus](#). The first platform is designed with materials for students, teachers and parents/guardians and includes digital files of textbooks for all grades, a digital library with access to more than 10,000 books, and materials for the teachers to be able to guide their students. [Aptus](#), the second platform, provides resources for educators to enhance their ability to deliver content and sustain engagement with their students (Aptus). According to Emanuela di Gropello (Pais, 01 Junio, 2020) Chile is also

sharing some of the resources and model created for the [Aprendo en línea](#) with some other countries in the region.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Mexico is perhaps one of the countries in the region with the longest tradition for distance learning through radio and television. Years ago, this country developed [Televisión Educativa](#), a network of educational television programs broadcast across the country for different grades. The pandemic has brought new attention to this network, which is now widely serving much of the student population. This broad reach assumes critical importance as there are large disparities in access to Internet, digital devices and digital platforms in Mexico. Although it considers the use of legacy media as important as that of newer technologies, the government has also invested in digital technologies to ease the quick transition to distance education both for students and teachers (Pais, 01 Junio 2020). [[open endnotes and references in new window](#)] Started two years ago, [Aprende en casa](#) (Learn at home) facilitates digital learning where students, teachers and parents can access a variety of tools and materials.



Website screenshot from the website of Aprende en casa, a digital platform for

education in Mexico.

Colombia, like most countries in the region, has also developed a digital platform [Aprender Digital: Contenidos para todos](#). This platform has over 80,000 educational resources for all grades. The Ministry of Education has partnered up with Radio-Television Colombiana or RTVC, Google, Khan Academy, Microsoft



Website screenshot of Aprender Digital: Contenidos para todos, digital education platform in Colombia. [Click here to see full size.](#)

and Oracle among others to help produce and disseminate educational content and also provide network security for students, teachers and others accessing these materials (<https://www.mineducacion.gov.co>). In addition to the platforms offered by the Ministry of Education, there are others created by the private companies (Pais, 01 Junio 2020).

ICTs, including digital platforms and educational media content have become more relevant than ever since the pandemic. All countries in the Latin American region have adopted combination of ICTs, television, radio, cell phones and online applications. However, technology has not been a complete solution, and most cases indicate that it can't be. A solid partnership between teachers, students, and parents is a prerequisite for the educational success of students, particularly at elementary and secondary levels. Also, both students and teachers are eager to return to classrooms, seeking some sense of normalcy. Some countries have begun to consider a hybrid model in which students may alternate in-person classes combined with distance learning from home—at least until there is a vaccine or after the pandemic ends.

“Getting together” in Peru: using TV, radio and digital platforms for education

In Peru, distance learning is not a new phenomenon, but as in many other parts of the globe it has accelerated and become widespread, taking on new significance due to the pandemic caused by the deadly new virus COVID-19. Since the 1960s, Peru has utilized radio, and later television, for elementary and secondary school distance education, especially to reach those in the most remote areas of the national territory including the highlands and the Amazon. Since the arrival of the Internet and other technologies in late 1990s, the educational system has incorporated the use of ICTs, for both elementary and secondary school, following a global trend in education and development. Peru's Plan Huascarán from 2001 to 2007 initiated the introduction of technology. The use of ICTs since then has increased, particularly in private schools but also in many public schools, especially in urban and semi-urban areas where Internet is more accessible.

When COVID-19 reached Peru in March 2020, teachers and students were getting ready to go back to school after summer vacation. The government's declaration of a state of emergency and order for all to stay at home prompted generalized distance learning, beginning in April at public and private schools and universities.



Empty classrooms in elementary school San Martín de Porres, Yucay, Peru.
Photo Gabriela Martínez.

That same month, the Ministry of Education launched the program [Aprendo en casa](#) or *I learn at home*. It embraced three different modalities: radio, television, and the Internet to teach across the national territory. To have broad national reach, the national television network TV-Peru and the national radio network RPP along with a few other radio networks committed some of their airtime to this educational effort, helping reach low income students, students in peripheral urban areas, and those in semi-rural and rural areas without a computer or Internet access at home. In addition, the Ministry of Education distributed 719,000 tablets with Internet access to rural students and 124,000 to urban students for virtual classes (Pérez, 24 de Setiembre, 2020).

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| | |
| <p>At 4,000 meters above sea level, the "I learn at home" (Aprendo en casa) platform designed by the Ministry of Education due to the suspension of face-to-face classes due to the coronavirus pandemic, could well be called "I learn on the hill." Source: AFP</p> | <p>Around 8 in the morning, they receive a call by cell phone or WhatsApp from Mery Quispe Achata, a teacher at the Conaviri school, who teaches them virtual classes. Source: AFP</p> |

Peru, a country with approximately 33 million people (INEI, 2020) has close to 40 million active mobile lines (Larocca, May 19, 2020). According to the Instituto Nacional de Economía e Informática (INEI) 92.1 % of Peruvian families have access to mobile telephony while only 35.9% have access to Internet at home. The combination of people using radio and television and having access to mobile

phones, including those living in remote areas of the national territory, has meant that a good number of students are able one way or another to get connected to Aprendo en casa program and to their schools or teachers. Since Aprendo en casa started, about 20% of the students learning through radio or television are digitally connected to their teachers via cell phone using the WhatsApp application. That app is used to message students about general course work, homework guidelines, and questions they may have (Díaz, 2020). Students from private schools do not use as much radio or television since many of those schools already incorporated online systems of learning. In addition, students in these schools tend to own a computer at home and so can access their education unit directly from digital platforms.



Screenshot of a weekly [podcast video](#), including the lesson for 6th grade in sign language.



Viviana, 16, a high school student from Urubamba, Peru, taking a picture with cell phone to send her homework via WhatsApp to her teacher. [Click here to see a closeup of what she has written](#). Photo Gabriela Martínez.

However, despite mammoth efforts to rapidly develop the Aprendo en casa program for the public education sector and despite the creative work of most teachers, students haven't received more than five to ten hours of lessons per week. Under normal circumstances in-person schooling requires and delivers about 30 contact hours per week (Díaz, 2020). In addition, many students both in elementary and secondary school are suffering with a radical change in procedure and ethos. Now self-discipline is key for succeeding as well as having adults involved in the educational process at home. Isolation is another factor that works against many students' formal learning. In addition, against what believers in distance education may have thought, many students are deserting schools for these reasons, but also because of economic hardships. In this way, private schools are especially suffering the consequences of an economic crisis brought about by the pandemic. Many parents with students in private schools now don't think distance education is worth their money and are asking for tuition or are placing their children in public schools (Alert@Económica, 30 Julio, 2020). It is clear that connectivity alone is not a solution for distance education, nor is access to technologies—whether legacy or new.



Gabriela Rojas, center, 9, helping her 3-year-old sister, Luna Rojas, right, and a neighbor, Yois Vasquez, 6, with their schoolwork in Lima. (Marco Garro for *The New York Times*)

(De)construction of educational environments

The pandemic is shifting paradigms of teaching and learning, thus facilitating the deconstruction of physical learning environments—including school buildings, classrooms, roads, electricity and concomitant facilities. As educators, parents, and legislators question the relevance of physical infrastructure for education, their concerns underscore the significance of *spaces* over *places*. The *place* propped up by the physical infrastructure of schools has been subsumed by platform-based *spaces*, created by a digital device and Internet connectivity. As a result, there is a shift in how and where education occurs. And this shift strengthens and somewhat normalizes a pattern of not being rooted in a single geographical place to learn and gain knowledge.

Such a symbolic deconstruction of physical places, in turn, has led to the construction of digital environments where schools and classrooms have become spaces anchored in the idea of coming together to learn on digital platforms. The idea of *places* of learning has been reduced to redundancy. As teachers still act as mediators in creating content for these platforms and managing the delivery of education and knowledge, these spaces act as “*mediated flux*.” The *mediated flux* is a transient digital space inhabited by people or their avatars to communicate, teach, learn, socialize, work and more. Our interactions are *mediated* by the different digital platforms we use and inhabit in daily life, and the *flux* is the ease with which we navigate changing from one digital space to another digital space. Digitality enhances our communicative abilities and populates our presence across various *mediated flux* sometimes simultaneously and other times discreetly.

Under the pandemic, *mediated flux* is more apparent given the need to embrace multiple digital platforms and social media technologies for the mass delivery of knowledge. We witness the increase of digital traffic and *flux* as it affects billions of students and teachers from around the world. Their learning experiences and school relationships must be now almost entirely mediated by digital technologies and spaces. This phenomenon facilitates a process similar to cloning of digital identities, one that enables the simultaneous presence of individuals across and within the virtual spaces. For instance, a teacher using Zoom to connect with



School yards and classrooms have been empty since April. Yucay, Peru. Photo Gabriela Martínez.

students creates breakout rooms assigning groups to each room within the digital space, leading to the systematic segregation of spaces that act as separate digital environments within the larger digital classroom. Thus students “are” in the digital classroom while also being at the same time in the breakout rooms with their groups. At the same time, students could be taking notes on Google Drive, and simultaneously chatting with a friend on WhatsApp about a doubt or homework assignment that is being talked about in the group or in the virtual class. This navigation from one digital platform to another constitutes *mediated flux*.

Though the *mediated flux* enables simultaneous presence of users in more than one space, such as WhatsApp, Google Drive and Zoom, we argue that it creates a fragmented educational experience, especially for the student. It is precisely the mediation, especially of technology, that causes fragmentation of the educational experience. To fit the distance mode of instruction and cater to the ever-decreasing attention span on screen, the content is deliberately truncated into lessons that are shorter than those developed for teaching in-person in the conventional classroom. As a result, the combination of shortened lessons and divided attention caused by constant navigation within the *mediated flux* raises questions about repercussions in the poverty of learning, this time not only for those in elementary school but also those in secondary.

The educational conditions due to the pandemic herald a new era of engagement with digital and legacy technologies while also prompting deficiencies and more potential flaws in the learning process. Disadvantaged students are the ones that would suffer the most, but also more affluent students and in private school. In the realm of distance education all are subjected to the *mediated flux* and the educational fragmentation it creates, and all are lacking the important physical presence of in-person mediation.

Space divide

Problematically, governments may take advantage of the shifting paradigm from *place* to *space* and cut expenses, placing the burden of costs on students and teachers who are providing their own places, electricity, Internet, and devices for accessing or delivering educational content. Moreover, the unpaid labor of parents and families has expanded as they must assist in educating their children, and that social labor is not receiving either the credit or compensation that it should ideally receive.



Guided by their mother, four Peruvian boys climb daily to the top of a hill in the Andes, near Lake Titicaca , to pick up signals on their mobile phones and receive virtual classes during the pandemic. Source: AFP



The 43-year-old woman accompanies her children in their studies, while her husband, Juan Cabrera, herds cattle in this area where Quechua families, the largest ethnic group in Peru, live. Source: AFP

In March of 2020, right before classes were about to start and as the pandemic reached Peru, the Ministry of Education announced that out of 54,890 public schools across the country about 21,017 required repairs to their infrastructure; in some cases about 70% of numerous schools' infrastructure needed to be demolished (RPP, 3 de Marzo, 2020). However, given the pandemic, schools did not open. In theory, this gave some time to the government and the Ministry of Education to improve the deficient infrastructures. But it is not certain to what extent school repairs have taken place during this year's closure because the Ministry of Education has been focused on shifting gears for distance education and reacting to the pandemic.



Empty classrooms in Peru's San Martin de Porres elementary school in Yucay.
Photo Gabriela Martínez

As we postulate that schools' physical infrastructure may not be as central as it was pre-pandemic in the educational system, now media, digital spaces of education, and equitable access assume paramount importance. Though students do not need physically to commute to schools, ownership of electronic gadgets and devices, along with access to data suddenly seems indispensable. To augment the concept of a digital divide, the current paradigm underscores the significance of a *space divide*. That is, there's an inequitable access to digital and physical spaces where education is delivered and consumed.

Numerous challenges influence equity, inclusiveness and accessibility of educational *space*. Broadly speaking, the *place* of school acts as an equalizer levelling all students as equals in a classroom. The provision of books, activities, classrooms and teachers constitutes learning opportunities that are offered equally to all the students, consequently putting all of them on equal footing. However, when the responsibility of learning is decentralized, parceled out to discreet units of students and parents in their homes, not all of students stand an equal chance to access or inhabit *similar or equal* learning spaces. Homes, where parents or guardians living at home might be struggling to feed all the siblings, face many problems. These include

- incidents of domestic violence,
- premature responsibility of for earning a living put on children
- crowded home spaces,
- irregular Internet or cellphone access, etc.

Many social and economic problems can act as detrimental factors in disturbing the learning environment and inhibiting the access to the learning *space*, thus widening the *space divide*. Thus, a conceptual understanding of *space divide* also means knowing about the social, economic, and physical barriers that influence access to education.



Miriam Flores, 37, helping Yois Vasquez, 6, in Lima. Only 15 percent of public school students in Peru have access to a computer at home. (Marco Garro for *The New York Times*)

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Several schools hired private EdTech companies to aid online education, but these eventually required high fees for their services. Despite owning digital devices, the educational spaces remained out of bounds for thousands of children due to the lack of financial resources. With precarious employment conditions of parents and guardians due to the pandemic, an additional burden of paying for distance education seemed difficult for families. Thus, dearth of financial resources, compounded by the pandemic has been an important factor in shaping the *space divide* in education.

In Peru, as massive unemployment is negating the results of acclaimed initiatives to fight poverty, the number of people living below the poverty line is going to be around 27% (Chauvin and [Faiola](#), October 16, 2020). [[open endnotes and references in new window](#)] While some families can afford continuing to pay for private schools and study in rich online learning environments, many students have none of that. Thousands have their education reduced to 30 minutes lessons broadcast on national Peruvian television or radio networks with instructions for self- study on brief phone texts, which could be accessed through the family cellphone.



Cousins Fabrizio Ccapcha, left, and Benjamin Trujillo, both 13, in Fabrizio's bedroom. They receive their assignments through WhatsApp when their 3G connection is working. (Daniela Rivera Antara for *The Washington Post*)

As low-income families are hit disproportionately, the dropout rate of children has increased from 11.8% in 2019 to 17.9% in 2020 (Chauvin and [Faiola](#), October 16, 2020). With university dropouts in Peru also surging from 12% to 19% in 2020, analysts are also warning of mass desertion of educational institutions as relying only on distance education risks leaving many students out.

Challenges of distance education during the pandemic

While most students have been highly adaptive in transitioning to the online mode of education and educators have been innovative in their approaches to

deliver content, there are opportunities to improve and strengthen existing capacity. There are disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of full digital access and conducive home spaces for learning. These impact educational outcomes, even more so during the pandemic. Radio and televised *Aprendo en casa* (I learn at home) lessons for various grade levels, including curricular units in the local indigenous languages, can reach a broader number of students without access to digital platforms. However, a lack of access to digital devices with connectivity or with enough data regularly impedes many students from completing homework or connecting for guidance with their teachers.



Delia says her parents cannot afford books — she misses reading about animals in the school library — and she has no one to check her work. (Marco Garro for *The New York Times*)

Even though most Peruvians own a cell phone, including those in rural areas and poor urban areas, not everyone has access to big data plans for cell phone use. As a result, households that have mobile phones but restricted data plans do not constitute a conducive environment for children's learning at home. One common educational strategy has been to use WhatsApp for messaging between teachers and students, and teachers and parents. However, according to conversations with a few teachers in the town of Urubamba and city of Cusco, we learn that connecting with students via the app has not been enough as many children did not get sufficient help at home, leading them to fall behind and sometimes drop out from school.

Another major challenge comes from asynchronous modes of teaching, where students must engage with materials on their own or with help from an adult at home. Asynchronous education requires self-discipline on the part of the students as they need to administer their own time for contact hours and engagement with the materials. Additionally, if the students are young children in kindergarten and early grades of elementary school, they require the help of an adult at home, which has put tremendous pressure on working parents or on older siblings who also need to attend to their own classes. Furthermore, in many rural and poor urban areas in a good number of mixed households, the children are gaining an education but the adults in their lives may have only gone to elementary school or are illiterate. In those mixed households, parents or guardians are unable to help young children follow lesson plans or complete remote homework.

Also, when the burden of schoolwork and learning primarily falls on students and

their families, an intergenerational gap in handling technology becomes more apparent. Many adults responsible for their children's education struggle to learn the technology and its educational purposes.



Single father Luis Alberto Soayne, 42, with his children as they prepare for the school day. Nicol, 9, and Adriano, 5, have received their school books; Missael, 14, and María Cristina, 17, work from their father's phone, when it's available. (Daniela Rivera Antara for *The Washington Post*)

Not just parents, even teachers struggle to cope with the variety of digital platforms and apps to deliver course content to the students. Though some educators are trained to disseminate and impart distance learning, ground implementation has been starkly different. Furthermore, the pandemic has made clear that teachers need *ongoing* professional training to enhance their pedagogical methods and technological abilities.

The pandemic has transformed the context of implementing a curriculum, not just because using digital platforms means a teacher has to consider conditions other than those for which the curriculum was designed. In fact, we know that some learning competencies are more relevant in the context of the pandemic. In Peru, and other Latin American countries, adjustments to the new context may also focus on values revealed as necessities in the current conjuncture:

- solidarity,
- autonomous learning,
- self-care and care for others,
- socio-emotional competencies,
- health and resilience, among others.

Teaching these social skills takes place in addition to regular curriculum (CEPAL-UNESCO, 2020). However, new demands find teachers' training and availability of resources insufficient for the challenges of quickly adapting pedagogical formats to students' needs, especially in disadvantaged environments (CEPAL-UNESCO, 2020).

We cannot say yet what the impact and consequences of distance education during the pandemic (and in the future) will be among a diverse student population. However, teachers and experts are already pointing out that the learning gap will widen due socio-economic inequities and uneven access to curricular materials, furthering already existing issues of learning poverty and

school desertion.

Conclusion: how does the future look?

Though distance learning pedagogy is not a new phenomenon, COVID-19 has acted as a catalyst for the expanded scale of its adoption and innovation. During the pandemic, the EdTech companies started to provide free services for a temporary period such as livestreaming and video conferencing, along with celebrity figures delivering educational content and guest lessons, sometimes on behalf of the government (Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020). As the importance and usage of distance education technologies has become more pervasive, moving across social sectors, it has provided an educators an opportunity to be more creative, despite tense conditions. It not only delivers information via interesting and varied methods but also helps families, especially parents, who are now responsible for their children's education in absence of physical classrooms and conventional instruction.

However, as the financial markets are seeing a slump across various sectors, distance education has gained capitalists' sudden surge of interest in its financial opportunities. Emphasizing a need to consider ethics while augmenting digital capabilities of e-learning platforms during the crises, Williamson, Eynon and Potter (2020) not,

“Yet at the same time, it appears clear that certain actors in the Edtech industry are treating the crisis as a business opportunity, with potentially long-term consequences for how public education is perceived and practised long after the coronavirus has been brought under control.”

The pandemic may have presented an excellent opportunity for e-learning platforms to increase profits and gain a substantive leverage on educational practices (Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020). Several technology giants like Google, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft have now rapidly increased their infrastructural capacities and are experimenting with creative ways of delivering educational content.

While the journey of transitioning from physical schools to online mode during the early months of the pandemic was bumpy, some believe that this “unplanned and rapid move” might contribute towards a new hybrid model of digital learning and human interaction, and that this probably will be a major component of future life (Li & Lalani, 2020). The increasing influence of EdTech firms in the sphere of public education warrants more deliberation.

During the past several months, schools as institutions have been “broken-up, decentralized and marketized,” running the risk of diminished state regulation of public education in future (Hillman, Bergviken Rensfeldt and Ivarsson, 2020). Distance education has put the onus of education on disaggregated units of teachers and students, now anchored in their own homes, detached from pedagogical and institutional principles. Educational spaces are mediated by EdTech businesses or governments working in conjunction and input from EdTech companies. Re-thinking EdTech's commercial motives, Williamson, Eynon and Potter (2020) note,

“The current state of 'pandemic pedagogy,' in other words, may not be seen by some businesses as simply an emergency response to a public health and political crisis, but as a rapid prototype of education as a private service and an opportunity to recentralize decentralized systems through platforms.”

A UNESCO report titled, “Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for Public Action” further cautions about the role of technology companies in pushing educational and digital transitions, and it calls for increased participation of students, teachers, civil society, government and policy representatives in the decision-making process around EdTech (UNESCO, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented disruption to education and other sectors, including initiating a new era in the realm of education. The future points towards the very slow return to the classrooms, most likely using a hybrid model of face-to-face instruction and distance education. This will require that governments in Peru, and other Latin American countries, provide more adequate training to teachers and better engagement with parents to support the students. Also, governments must provide investments for repairing or improving physical infrastructures as well as expanding access to digital tools and Internet connectivity—guaranteeing equitable access to learning *spaces*. In addition, governments must continue to attend to socio-economic issues and set in place policies for improving the social circumstances that impact both the digital divide and *space divide*.

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Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, we use the term “distance education/learning” primarily because it not only covers the component of digital platforms for online teaching/learning but also entails the inclusion of television and radio for education.
2. Learning poverty is defined by the proportion of children who at 10 years old are unable to read fluently or comprehend a simple text.
3. Plan Huascarán begun in 2001 and it was folded in 2007 to give way to other similar projects by the Ministry of Education for distribution of ICTs to public schools along with access to the Internet.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Time in the age of the Coronavirus and #BlackLivesMatter: a dossier

- [Synchronicity, social media, and the modern protest movement by Cara Caddoo](#)
- [My journey to 2020 Activism Lane by Jaicey Bledsoe](#)
- [Social media and continuity in the Black freedom struggle by Travis Wright](#)
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The [South China Morning Post](#) covers the protest in Seoul, South Korea

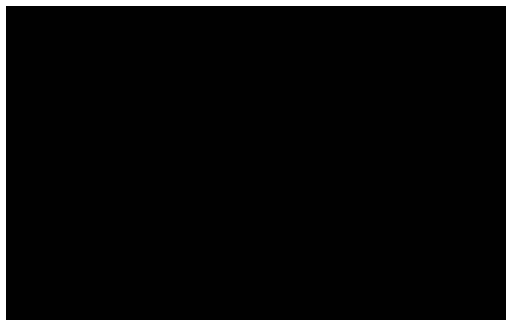
Synchronicity, social media, and the modern protest movement

by [Cara Caddoo](#)

When the protests erupted in Minneapolis, I was headed to the hospital. In the



Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, founders of the #BlackLivesMatter social media hashtag, on the cover of *Time* magazine.



[#BlackoutTuesday](#) became a popular but contested hashtag in the summer of 2020.

Keine Anklage wegen Polizeischüssen auf Schwarzen



[Bild \(Germany\)](#) reporting on BLM. The caption

nervous minutes before I was given anesthesia, I scrolled through Twitter and Facebook, feeling angry, frustrated, sick. Breonna Taylor had been killed just a few months earlier. George Floyd had died not far from where I grew up, murdered in broad daylight on a busy city street in the presence of dozens of onlookers. I don't remember what happened next or much of the week after but when I was finally alert enough to make sense of what was going on around me, it felt like the world had shifted. Had public opinion really changed so quickly? In the months that followed, it became clear that I wasn't alone. Although the Black Lives Matter movement remains divisive, and though years of organizing and direct action led to the responses that we saw last summer, those weeks proved pivotal. What was once perceived as a series of scattered events was now understood as a social movement of national and global proportions.

As an historian of the media and Black social movements, I'm often asked about how Black Lives Matter compares to the protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Although I see them as two distinct moments, it's clear they share considerable commonalities in terms of their goals and strategies. Both social movements (broadly defined as ongoing collective action by people who believe that they share a common purpose) have relied on access to physical and virtual public spaces where people can exchange ideas, form shared opinions, and organize themselves. In this respect, we can see Black newspapers, magazines, and radio, and an analog to social media and its critical role in facilitating the formation of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Moreover, both of these movements brought together a series of geographically dispersed actions by different groups of people who came to see themselves progressing together in time toward a shared cause.

Few moments have so clearly brought to relief the interplay of these factors—space, place, and time—than the events of this past year. As we have seen with recent Black Lives Matter marches, rallies, and other demonstrations, *IRL* gatherings and collective actions are a crucial component of the movement. But modern social movements also require a sense of synchronicity between strangers who have never met or directly communicated with each other. As the pandemic has transformed our relationship to physical public spaces, #BlackLivesMatter activists have become increasingly sophisticated in their use of Twitter and other social media platforms, which they have crafted into virtual public spaces where they speak simultaneously to those whom we might define as their counterpublics, which as Michael Warner explains are groups that maintain “at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status” and to the larger public whose opinions they may or may not share on any particular issue.

In using the term synchronicity, I'm referring less here to Jung's emphasis on coincidence than I am to the widely-perceived, culturally and socially determined effects of sync sound motion pictures. Two disparate parts, for example--the image of a man moving his mouth and a recorded track of sound, generate what we interpret as a seamless, a unified image of a person speaking. Perhaps most obviously, I'm borrowing here from Benedict Anderson to describe how

reads “Protests against racism and police violence are reignited before the prosecution's decision.”



[Le Monde \(France\) reports on protests in Paris.](#) The headline reads: "In a matter of days, Black Lives Matter becomes a universal slogan."



The *Times of India* reports on cricket player Hardik Pandya's support of BLM. [Click here to see video.](#)

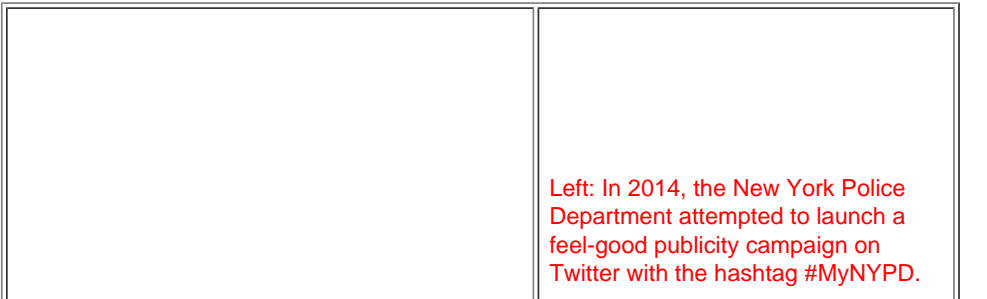
participants of social movements generate something akin to simultaneity, the sense of progressing together through linear time. But equally important is understanding how social movements are constituted through connections forged across difference. Stuart Hall's ideas of articulation and Brent Edward's writing on Diaspora are particularly useful for getting us to think about synchronicity in a way that accounts for the *work* involved in activism and facilitated by social media. Just as the film editor meticulously aligns image with sound or synchronized swimmers move intentionally together, activists have worked to forge connections between their different actions, words, posts, tweets, and likes.

By emphasizing synchronicity, I don't want to endorse a romanticization of protest movements in the vein of liberal humanism, which too often depicts legible forms of resistance as an awakening of the people to their own oppression. Nor should we assume that when things get bad enough, people will naturally revolt. Things have been bad. Social movements gain traction and collapse for reasons that have nothing to do with the desire, commitment or righteousness of their participants. And yet, social movements are in themselves indications of shifts in power and without desire, commitment and righteousness, we have little chance for effecting real change. We are best positioned to understand the potential for a more just future by thinking broadly and historically about what has changed to make this present moment possible.

Because I am not the most competent user of social media, I've invited two students to join me in thinking about social media and its place in the longer history of Black activism. Jaicey Bledsoe is a sophomore double majoring in Cinema & Media Arts and in Theatre & Drama at Indiana University, Bloomington and is a regular columnist for the *Indiana Daily Student*. Travis Wright is a doctoral student in American History at Indiana University, Bloomington, whose research considers the role of lesser-known activist organizations such as the Chicago Friends of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee).

Bledsoe's and Wright's essays underscore the importance of thinking about contingency and context when we consider what is exceptional about the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The fact that neither anti-Black violence nor the struggle against it are unique to our present historical moment is made abundantly clear in their essays, which reflect on the 1950s, 1980s, and today.

Their essays also remind us that context matters when it comes to the ways that visibility is produced, communicated, and interpreted through social media. Both Bledsoe and Wright point to the ways particular images have served as flashpoints in the history of the longer Black Freedom Movement. Yet they also emphasize how important it is to consider how, where, and with whom images are shared. As Bledsoe explains, she was able to frame her online conversations about anti-Black violence with "the benefit of readily accessible articles, books, and posts I've seen shared." Wright's essay similarly underscores how the Black press contextualized the images of Emmett Till in ways the resisted the previous circulation of images of Black lynching while also reminding us of the complex and vexed problem of visually representing Black death.



Left: In 2014, the New York Police Department attempted to launch a feel-good publicity campaign on Twitter with the hashtag #MyNYPD.



Below: #MyNYPD was soon co-opted by critics of police violence.



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James W. "Foxx" Bledsoe in his military uniform. He was a Vietnam Army veteran.



A 1959-60 school yearbook photo when my Uncle Foxx was in middle school.

My journey to 2020 Activism Lane



My great uncle and his siblings. Left to right: Robert “Bobby” Bledsoe (brother), Ronald “Bugsy” Bledsoe (brother), John “Johnny” Bledsoe (brother), Harold Bledsoe (father), Jackie Bledsoe Sr. (brother, my grandfather), and James “Foxx” Bledsoe.



A news clipping from the *Palladium-Item*, a newspaper in Richmond, Indiana, detailing the incidents leading up to and following my Uncle Foxx's death. Highlighted by my grandfather and great aunts and uncles as they investigated. [Click here to read it full-sized.](https://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/Caddoo-Bledsoe-Wright/Bledsoe.html)

by [Jacey Bledsoe](#)

My great uncle James William “Foxx” Bledsoe, a Black man from Richmond, Indiana, was 39 years old on March 20, 1987, when he was arrested for public intoxication in Richmond, though he had not been drinking for several hours prior to his arrest. Two days after he was arrested, my great-grandfather and one of my great aunts visited to bail him out. He declined, telling them not to waste money because he would see the judge Monday and anticipated a quick release. Not long after they left the department, the sheriff's deputies dragged him from his cell, beat and kicked him, threw him to the floor, and left him there. The other inmates had to mop the floor of his blood in the room where he was beaten and took him back to his cell. Sometime later, someone noticed that he had not moved from where he had been left, and appeared to be having a seizure.

I've always known that race relations in America were poor. But it wasn't until last semester, the end of my freshman year at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, that I became upfront about my thoughts and feelings on race and racism. A big reason why is the constant influx of incidents of injustice being shared, and my ability to quickly comment on them via social media. All the opinions I'd held but not vocalized boiled over in the midst of the brutality and killings of innocent Black people that have happened throughout this year. Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Dreasjon “Sean” Reed, Rayshard Brooks, Jonathan Price.

After some deputies realized my uncle had not moved, police personnel attempted and failed to revive him. According to Wayne County Sheriff Dennis Andrews, he was found semi-conscious and seizing at 6:40 pm, but the call to an ambulance was not made until 7:20 pm. Though he had dried blood in his nose and mouth when he arrived at the hospital, sheriff's deputies claimed Uncle Foxx was suffering from alcohol withdrawal and had fallen off his cot, shifting blame for his multiple “craniocerebral blunt force injuries”. My uncle was a young, Black Army veteran who served in the Vietnam War. He was well known around Richmond for being witty, good-natured, and caring, despite the trauma he experienced in Vietnam. He would often buy and bring pizzas to his nieces and nephews, a memorable occurrence in a small town. He was loved and is deeply missed by his immediate and extended family.

Earlier this year, my parents and I ran 2.23 miles in white t-shirts to pay tribute to Ahmaud Arbery, who was killed while out on a morning jog near his neighborhood. I'm not sure if I brought his killing up to my parents after seeing the video, or if they saw it and showed it to me, but I do remember my mom telling me some friends of hers on Facebook were planning to run with the #IRunWithMaud demonstrations happening all over the country. She did some digging through the hashtag on Facebook, and reached out to those friends to find out the significance of the distance we were to run—the month and day Arbery was murdered—and we made a plan to run. We then posted and hashtagged our own pictures and information. I was compelled to run not just to demand justice for Ahmaud and his family, but to protect my own. My dad frequently goes out running by himself. My brothers play in the street in front of our house. In order to prevent injustice like that from occurring in the future, people must speak up. Including me. Due to other tragic incidents of racial violence after Ahmaud's death, the conversation continued to open up.

At the hospital, Uncle Foxx slipped into a coma. He died two days later. The deputies told my great-grandfather, grandfather, and other great uncles and aunts that the charges against Uncle Foxx were being dropped, and asked them to sign a document clearing the department of liability for Uncle Foxx's injuries. My

The first Coroner's Certificate of Death signed two months after Foxx's death. This certificate indicates the method of death a homicide, the date of injury as March 22, 1987, and the location of injury Wayne County Jail. [Click here to read it full-sized.](#)

The subsequent Coroner's Certificate of Death signed six days after the previous one. This certificate lists the method of death as a homicide, but changes the date of injury to between March 19th—prior to his arrest—and 22nd, 1987, and the location of injury to "undetermined." [Click here to read it full-sized.](#)

grandfather was quoted in an article for Richmond's *Palladium-Item* as saying, "They were so forcibly trying to get us to sign this document. We raised the question: What happens if we don't?" My family was reportedly told they would "be under a bunch of trouble". They did not have a lawyer at the time. After Uncle Foxx's death, the autopsy results on his death certificate ruled his death a homicide and the locale of the fatal injuries as Wayne County Jail. Almost a week later, a second death certificate was prepared that listed the location of the injuries as undetermined and providing a date range for the injuries from March 19-22. This document implied he could've received the injuries prior to his arrest, thereby providing false evidence for the cause of his death and absolving the department of any wrongdoing. When my family began investigating the circumstances of my uncle's death, several members also said they received threats from the Indiana State Police that claimed they would be charged with obstruction of justice if they continued investigations.

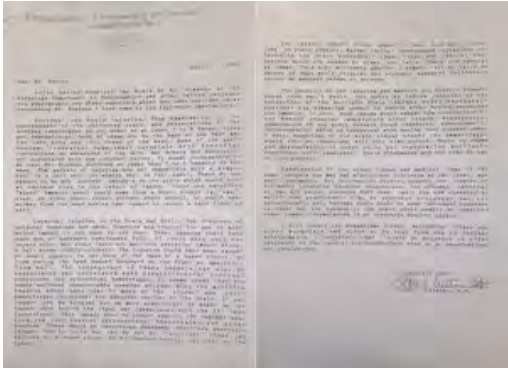
About a month after the run, I posted around six videos, one on Instagram and the rest on Snapchat, talking through my thoughts. In the Snapchat videos, I expressed my frustration about seeing a half dozen police cruisers sitting off the highway exits and in front of grocery stores. They were there because local high school students were protesting police brutality around their high school building. However, the protest was several miles away from where the police were sitting. They were prepared to respond with force to peaceful high schoolers who were exercising their First Amendment rights. The next day, I felt the need to talk about my mixed feelings; non-Black people were finally recognizing there was a problem, but Black people, myself included, had been trying for generations to get them to understand. That same day I posted a black square on Instagram for #BlackoutTuesday, an initiative started within the music industry as a day to listen to and reflect with Black people and especially, Black activists. Along with that post, I shared information about a boycott, encouraging people to spend their money at Black businesses instead of big chain corporations. When one of my former youth group leaders, a woman I once trusted and respected left a comment chastising me for my posts, it only spurred me on. The conversations were starting. My posts garnered many more responses than just hers. I was having conversations with my white friends about racial tensions in America who've likely never had conversations like that before. It gave me an outlet to express the pain and hurt myself and the rest of the Black community was going through. I process things by working through them.

Posting on social media gave me a feeling of purpose. I wasn't just stewing in my own grief and anger, I was making a difference, even if only in my little social media circle. I spoke with a couple of friends who were beginning to approach this subject with their family members, some of whom they already knew disagreed with them. Without the benefit of readily accessible articles, books, and posts I've seen shared and been able to share through social media, it would have been a lot more difficult to provide the same to those people.

I have been having conversations with my younger cousin, who is herself



A news clipping of a protest held in Richmond, Indiana in support of my great-uncle, and my family during the investigation surrounding his death. [Click here to read it full-sized.](#)



The autopsy completed by Jan E. Leestma, M.D., requested the following year by the Bledsoe family as a part of their investigation. This autopsy refutes the claim made by the police department that Foxx “fell in his cell.” [Click here to read it full-sized.](#)

beginning to use her voice to speak out for what she believes. Social media has especially been important in continuing these conversations remotely, as we are not able to be in person with groups of people right now due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been a vital tool in our conversations as we are not spending as much time with each other in person as we normally do. We have been chatting on a near-daily basis, which is ironically more often than we saw each other before COVID-19 restrictions. I have spoken with her about what happened to my Uncle Foxx and she has shared her concerns about potential police encounters with her own family. She, like me, also has younger siblings who she wants to be safe as they get older and are out in the world. She’s 17 years old, in her senior year of high school, and coming up against tough encounters with her non-Black friends who don’t support Black Lives Matter, or are unhappy that Trump lost the election. Prior to the events of this year, we didn’t have such specific and in-depth conversations about race. Now we constantly share resources and posts via Instagram direct messages that were made by other activists and everyday people. Resources like those that explore the statistics of brutality in America, or updates on the cases against perpetrators of racial violence. I am enjoying watching and assisting her, a young Black woman, in her journey.

From 1987, the year Uncle Foxx died, to 1991, there were several dozen articles written about his death, the investigation surrounding it, the eventual charging and convicting of some of the deputies and prosecutors involved in my uncle’s case—for illegally fixing other police reports—and the protests that were held in his honor. The articles also include details of the case that were brought up in the wrongful death suit that my family later filed and lost. These articles—and protests—ranged in location from Richmond, Indianapolis, Chicago, and around the Midwest. This year, amidst the other Black Lives Matter protests, a written piece honoring my uncle was placed at a community memorial in Barcelona by a friend of my family, and images of it were shared by family and friends on Facebook.

Without social media, my friends and I wouldn’t be talking about racism, brutality, and the Black Lives Matter movement. The reason there have been near-daily protests is that the first two major incidents of racial violence in 2020 were both caught on camera and shared over and over on social media. Unfortunately, there were no cell phone cameras when my Uncle Foxx was brutalized, and the jail he died in was later destroyed and relocated, so there is no known footage of the attack. The deaths of both Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd were videoed and both went viral on social media. Without the ease of connection and communication that social media provides, it would take much longer for people in other places in the U.S. to have heard about their deaths, and it likely wouldn’t have reached other countries the way it did either. The use of visual media has added a new dimension to activism, one that allows people in separate areas, from all walks of life, and at any time, to come together to fight for a common cause. This happens today in a way that it couldn’t have happened prior to the creation and public use of personal recording devices and social media.

More than three decades after his death, my uncle James “Foxx” Bledsoe has still received no justice. Police brutality and violence against Black people in America

isn't new. Racism and its effects aren't new to me. What is new is the knowledge and ability to do something about it. I can no longer sit quietly, or only talk about it amongst my family and close friends. Social media has given me the opportunity to start these conversations on a larger scale.

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Social media and continuity in the Black freedom struggle

by [Travis Wright](#)

Few would deny the relationship between images of Black death and Black community activism. Contemporary Black protest has in many ways been instigated by the rise of popular social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Activists and other social media users have used these platforms to make visible the recurring instances of police brutality and racial injustice, further dispelling the myth of post-racialism. Historically, images have played a central role in the Black Freedom Struggle, and visuals of Black death and Black protestors being beaten by police and white vigilantes galvanized Black communities and sometimes garnered support from white liberals. These types of images have functioned as a catalyst for Black activism and larger sociopolitical movements for racial justice. This is reflected by both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement.



Emmett Till with his mother Mamie Till. *Jet Magazine*, Sept. 15, 1955

The relationship between images of Black death and community activism is not a new phenomenon. In late August of 1955, the body of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was discovered in the Tallahatchie River. Till was viciously beaten and killed a group of white men for allegedly flirting with Carolyn Bryant, the clerk at Bryant Grocery. Despite Till's badly disfigured body, Mamie Till insisted on having an open casket funeral for her son, stating "Let the people see what they did to my boy." [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Not only did more than a thousand people attend Till's funeral service, but pictures of the boy's unrecognizable body circulated throughout the media, especially the *Chicago Defender* which was one of the largest Black newspapers in the country at the time. [2]



Mamie Till viewing her son's body. *Jet Magazine*, Sept. 15, 1955

Other notable Black newspapers and media included the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Pittsburg Courier*, and *Jet* and *Ebony* magazine. It was through most of these sources, especially *Jet*, that images of Till's death were circulated. The infamous photograph of Till lying in his casket was published by *Jet* magazine and reached millions of people, including foreign adversaries.[3] This significantly undermined the U.S.'s moral authority in the midst of the Cold War. Cora Patton, president of Chicago's local NAACP alluded to this when she spoke of Till's trial saying, "The eyes of the world are on the trial. It's not going to help the United States' situation in Europe and Asia if a fair and just trial is not held." [4]

Images of Till's body, coupled with the acquittal of those responsible for his death, galvanized Black communities in Chicago and throughout the South. Scholars such as Timothy Tyson have even suggested that Till's murder was the spark that ignited the Civil Rights Movement. Writing in 1955, journalist Carl Hirsch echoed this stating, "People everywhere are joining to fight because of the way Emmett Till died – but also because of the way he was forced to live." [5] In the weeks after Till's murder, NAACP headquarters reported that an overwhelming amount people "have been prompted to act by the horror of the anti-Negro crime," and that many contributed money or became official members of the NAACP, which at the time was the leading civil rights organization in the country.[6] The Chicago branch of the NAACP held its largest civil rights mass meeting at the Metropolitan Community Church where ten thousand people gathered to protest the killing of Till along with ongoing issues of racial injustice throughout the country.[7] As a result, resolutions were passed condemning anti-Black violence in both Chicago and Mississippi.[8] The NAACP also partnered with other church, civil, and labor organizations like the United Automobile Workers to plan what the *Chicago*

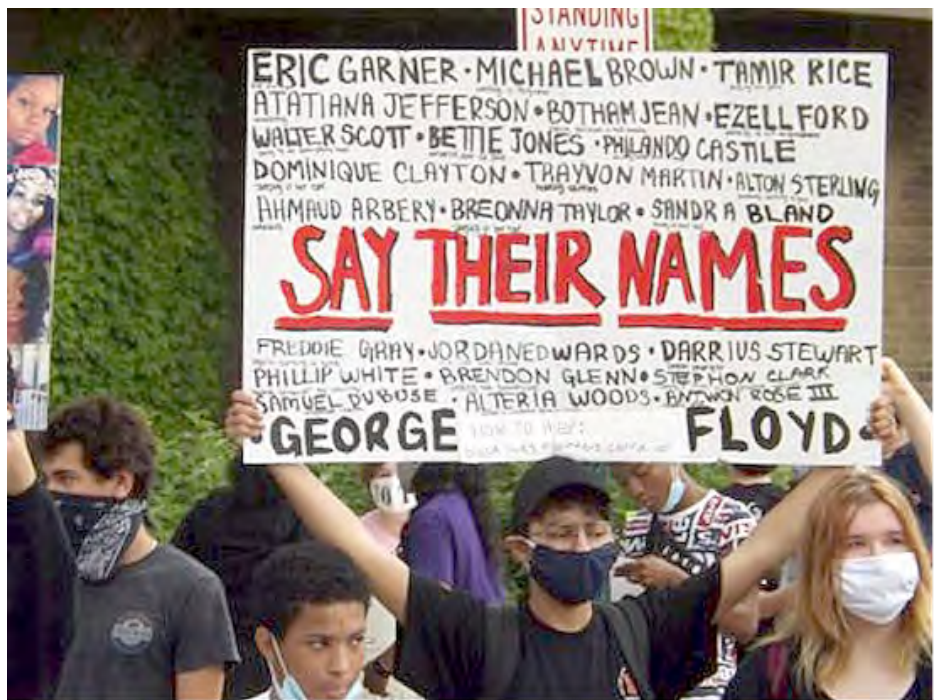
Defender referred to as a “nation-wide civil rights mobilization” in the wake of Till’s murder to pressure federal officials to draft legislation protecting the civil and human rights of Black Americans.[9]



J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant (with Carolyn Bryant) celebrating their acquittal by an all-white jury for the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till. *Associated Press*

Sixty-five years later, the centrality of images and the circulation of information is reflected by the Black Lives Matter Movement. For instance, when seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was murdered by George Zimmerman, the movement for Black lives was ignited. The movement gained national political momentum after the murders of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014. After videos of Eric Garner’s murder began to circulate on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, a series of protests emerged throughout the country, especially on college campuses. A similar course of action unfolded in 2020 after videos surfaced of George Floyd, an unarmed and non-resisting Black man, being choked to death by officer Derek Chauvin. Protests were compounded following the acquittal of the officers responsible for breaking into the home of Breonna Taylor—a 26-year-old healthcare worker—and killing her in sleep.

Collective action and widescale campaigns for racial justice in the wake of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor’s murder demonstrate the ongoing connection between images of Black death and community protest. Just like in 1955 with the killing of Emmett Till, the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020 reveal the ways in which images and the rapid spread of information has evolved. During the Civil Rights Movement, images and the circulation of information was largely a product of the Black media. Today, social media has made the all-too-common unjustified killings of unarmed Black people immediately visible on platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Black protestors have used these images, both historically and contemporarily, as a weapon to mobilize communities and build multicultural coalitions around issues of race and racial injustice.



Hundreds of students of Oak Park and River Forest High in Oak Park, Illinois protesting in the wake of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's murder. *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 2020.

However, it is important to note that images alone do not lead to wide-scale protest. Black protest was and is the result of racial, political, and socioeconomic conditions that have systemically oppressed and marginalized Black communities: police brutality; the mass incarceration of Black people; inequities in housing, education, employment and much more. By mediating these underlying conditions and advocating for racial advancement, the Black press developed a racial and political consciousness that made it an agent of protest, often relying on images to help galvanize Black communities.

While the killing of Emmett Till in 1955 along with the murders George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020 demonstrate how images of Black death have served as a catalyst for Black protest, such imagery also makes it clear that these publicized instances of unjustified racial killings and state violence are not isolated events. George Floyd and Breonna Taylor are just the most recent examples of a long list of Black men, women, and children that have been murdered by white racists. Black communities are not protesting for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor alone; they are protesting Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jimmy Lee Jackson, Richard Gardner, Rodney King, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Rayshard Brooks, Atatiana Jefferson, Stephon Clark, Philando Castille, Alton Sterling, Ahmaud Arbery and many, many more, making it clear that the current movement for Black lives is part of a much longer and ongoing struggle for Black freedom and justice in the United States.

Notes

1. Timothy Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 71. [[return to text](#)]
2. Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 14.
3. Timothy Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 75.

4. John Barrow, "Here's a Picture of Emmett Till Painted by Those Who Knew Him," *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 1, 1955.
5. Carl Hirsch, "This Was Emmett Louis Till," *Daily Worker*, October 9, 1955.
6. "Emmett Till Case Gains All Out Aid for NAACP," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Sept. 29, 1955.
7. Robert Birchman, "10,000 Jam Till Mass Meet Here," *Chicago Defender*, October 8, 1955.
8. Birchman, "10,000 Jam Till Mass Meet Here," *Chicago Defender*, October 8, 1955.
9. Robert Birchman, "Nation-Wide Civil Rights Mobilization in January," *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 19, 1955.

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Resources

by [Cara Caddoo](#)

Here is a short list and very incomplete list of books, articles, interview, and podcasts that have informed some of our conversations about how the past relates to the historical present. I've tried to include a mix of academic and non-academic texts. There's also a few books here that I'm looking forward to reading over the next few months.

Beginning with the longer history of race and visibility:

- This interview contains a link to this classic essay by **Frederick Douglass**, "Pictures and Progress," <https://www.loc.gov/item/mfd.28009/?locId=blogpic>.
- **Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer's** *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* [<http://tupress.temple.edu/book/20000000009589>];
- **Jasmine Nicole Cobb** *Picture Freedom Remaking Black Visibility in the Early Nineteenth Century* [<https://scholars.duke.edu/display/pub1089632>];
- **Nell Painter**, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known," in the *Journal of American History*. [<https://academic.oup.com/jah/article-abstract/81/2/461/691820?redirectedFrom=PDF>]

Few scholars have transformed the ways that we think about race and visibility like the brilliant **Nicole Fleetwood**.

- Her book *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness* is an essential read.
- Her new book *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* [<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674919228>] is the first book on my reading list.

Tina M. Campt's work, especially her book *Listening to Images* [<https://www.dukeupress.edu/listening-to-images>], had been so important in getting us to think beyond vision to consider how we give particular images meaning. "Be it a portrait, a daguerreotype, an album, our experiences with those images is really about touching them, leafing through them, giving them to other people, sending them to folks, framing them, displaying them—those are not just encounters of vision or sight," she explains in this great *Imagine Otherwise* interview [<https://ideasonfire.net/63-tina-campt>]. *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press, 2017)

Saidiya Hartman's groundbreaking work on the archive, representation, and depictions of the black body in pain. See for example,

- "An Unnamed Girl, a Speculative History," *The New Yorker* [<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/an-unnamed-girl-a-speculative-history>];
- *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* [<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/scenes-of-subjection-9780195089844?cc=us&lang=en&>]
- "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* [<https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe/article/12/2/1/32332/Venus-in-Two-Acts>]

As **Jacquelyn Goldsby's** *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* [<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo3645697.html>] and **Shawn Michelle Smith's** *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* [<https://www.dukeupress.edu/photography-on-the-color-line>] have demonstrated, lynchings and images of lynchings were highly public spectacles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Until the 1908, postcards of lynchings regularly circulated through the U.S. mail. These images, which clearly depicted the faces of the lynch mobs, did not bring these murderers to justice.

If public-facing action is an inherent aspect of participating in social movements, we need to grapple with the ways race has figured into history of surveillance and ideas of criminality in the United States.

- **Khalil Gibran Muhammad's** *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* [<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674238145>]
- **Carl Suddler's** *Presumed Criminal: Black Youth and the Justice System in Postwar New York* [<https://nyupress.org/9781479847624/presumed-criminal/>]

"I just don't want to have this kind of technological determinism that a camera will save us from the camera, because it definitely won't," **Simone Browne** explains, "Videos alone won't make things substantially different for black people resisting surveillance or white supremacy. But there is something, with those videos showing our own narration of them, our ways of understanding that moment, to recognize white supremacy and to challenge it, that's happening now. But it's still black death." [<https://www.wired.com/story/how-surveillance-reinforced-racism/>]. Her book *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* [<https://www.dukeupress.edu/dark-matters>] considers the entwined history of surveillance, blackness, and racial formation.

Leigh Raiford's *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* is an essential book for anyone interested in the history of visual culture and the struggle for Black freedom. She considers how photography came to play an especially prominent role in Black activism in the mid-twentieth century. As she reminds us [<https://hyperallergic.com/572314/photographs-freedom-leigh-raiford/>]: “The move we have to think about is the move away from the photograph as helping us access truth. And instead to think about the photograph as helping us access knowledge. And that that knowledge is not necessarily something that has to be seen to be understood.”

“Just as much as nonviolent direct action, rebellion presented a way for the oppressed and disenfranchised to express collective solidarity in the face of punitive state forces, exploitative institutions, and calcified “democratic” institutions,” **Elizabeth Hinton** writes in “The Minneapolis Uprising in Context,” *Boston Review*, May 29, 2020 [<http://bostonreview.net/race/elizabeth-hinton-minneapolis-uprising-context>]. I’m looking forward to reading her new book ***America on Fire*** *The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s* [<https://wnorton.com/books/america-on-fire>]

Andrea Ritchie documents how policing disproportionately affects the lives of Black and Indigenous women in *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* [<http://invisiblenomorebook.com/>].

More than any other historian, **Mary L. Dudziak's** *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* [<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691152431/cold-war-civil-rights>] has helped me to understand why we need to think broadly about a range of social and political confluences when we consider the history of the classically defined Civil Rights Movement. In this book she argues that certain civil rights demands gained traction during the Cold War as the U.S. federal government sought to improve its global image. She outlines some of her ideas in “George Floyd Moves the World The Legacy of Racial Protest in America and the Imperative of Reform” [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-11/george-floyd-moves-world>]

Another great book that accounts for US foreign and domestic policy in the history of U.S. race relations is **Ellen D. Wu's** *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* [<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691168029/the-color-of-success>].

In his essay, Travis Wright's references **Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's** essay “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past Long Civil Rights” from the *Journal of American History* [<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3660172?seq=1>], a must-read for thinking about how we define social movements.

In chapter six “Mobilizing an Envisioned Community,” of my book *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* [<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674368057>] I consider an overlooked set of factors that contributed the formation of the first mass Black protest movement of the twentieth century.

In this interview, **Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham** discusses some of the strategic reasons that earlier generations of activists embraced respectability politics, “wrestling with respectability in the age of #blacklivesmatter: a dialogue with Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham” [<http://www.forharriet.com/2015/10/wrestling-with-respectability-in-age-of.html>]

Racquel J. Gates’ excellent book *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* [<https://www.dukeupress.edu/double-negative>] asks, “If one were to eschew the politics of respectability altogether and disregard the notion that media representations directly support or challenge racism, where would that leave categories of positivity and negativity?”

As my colleague **Liza Black** [[@_Liza_Black](#)] points out in her new book *Picturing Indians: Native Americans in Film, 1941-1960* [<https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/nebraska/9780803296800/>], there are important differences between colonialism and racism. Scholars of Native American history, especially regarding sovereignty, offer us some of the most interesting ways of thinking through the problem of visibility.

Finally, to return to the theme of time, I want to underscore how much work goes into social media activism. Thinking about activism as both a form of labor and as a form of care is important. In doing so, I want to recognize the type of actions that we perform which fall outside of traditional definitions of resistance but which are just as important to the formation of social movements.

“A radical ethic of care compels us to build new things to compensate for the inability of capitalism to care. To seek coalition with colleagues, families, friends, strangers. To be honest with our students, our colleagues, families, friends that we are working while at home under remote emergency conditions. We teach, working to brighten the dark for our students, for our families, for our colleagues. Devotion causes us to ask who we have overlooked because we never had to look before.” These words come from historian **Michelle Moyd** [[@mimoyd1](#)] in her essay “You Need Devotion: A Syllabus” [<https://digitalfeministcollective.net/index.php/2020/08/28/you-need-devotion-a-syllabus/>]. You can get her recently co-authored book *Linguistic Disobedience: Restoring Power to Civic Language* with **Yuliya Komska and David Gramling** here [<https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319920092>].

Useful Twitter resources

| | |
|--|---|
| Mary L. Dudziak @marydudziak https://twitter.com/marydudziak | Nicole Fleetwood @NicoleFleetwoo2 https://twitter.com/NicoleFleetwoo2 |
| Andrea Ritchie @dreanyc123 https://twitter.com/dreanyc123 | Leigh Raiford @professoroddj https://twitter.com/professoroddj |
| Jasmine Cobb @jasminecobbphd https://twitter.com/jasminecobbphd | Racquel Gates @racquelgates https://twitter.com/racquelgates |
| Carl Suddler @Prof_Suddler https://twitter.com/Prof_Suddler | Nell Painter @PainterNell https://twitter.com/PainterNell |
| Simone Browne @wewatchwatchers https://twitter.com/wewatchwatchers | Christina Sharpe @hystericalblkns https://twitter.com/hystericalblkns |
| Michelle Moyd @mimoyd1 https://twitter.com/mimoyd1 | Yuliya Komska @ykomska https://twitter.com/ykomska |

| | |
|---|--|
| Cara Caddoo @caracaddoo https://twitter.com/caracaddoo | Liza Black @_Liza_Black https://twitter.com/_Liza_Black |
| Jodi A. Byrd @arsavium https://twitter.com/arsavium | Elizabeth Hinton @elizabhinton https://twitter.com/elizabhinton |
| Khalil Gibran Muhammad @KhalilGMuhammad https://twitter.com/KhalilGMuhammad | Amrita Myers @CountessCanuck https://twitter.com/CountessCanuck |
| Ellen D. Wu @EllenDWu https://twitter.com/ellendwu | Anthony C. Ocampo @anthonyocampo https://twitter.com/anthonyocampo |

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Indymedia held a lot of promise during its emergence in 1999 as it offered the first widely accessible open publishing platform that linked international collective movements together on one website. The site did not use cookies, which allowed users to anonymously visit it and post material. In many ways, the Indymedia website anticipated open publishing functions that commercial “social” media would appropriate and monetize.



A cover image from *Turbulence*, a magazine by and for the alter-globalization movement. One

Dossier on connective and collective practices:

Small media activism in the twenty-first century

by Chris Robé

Links to parts of the dossier:

- [Introduction: reflections on Indymedia at a moment of uncertainty](#)
- [Part I. Small media and the global eruption of new digital movements.](#)
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Introduction: reflections on Indymedia at a moment of uncertainty

In 2009 when I began research for my last book on anarchist-inflected video activism of the last fifty years, the global media activism scene appeared to be in a torpor. This was shocking to many since it followed only ten years after the international christening of the alter-globalization movement during the 1999 Seattle protests that shutdown the World Trade Organization meetings occurring there and birthed the creation of Indymedia, a D.I.Y. organization that somewhat grandiosely pronounced that anyone can “be the media.”

The history of Indymedia has been recounted numerous times, but it is worth stressing that its arrival on the scene anticipated much of the future direction that the Web would take. It provided the first-ever website where users could post comments, videos, news stories, pictures, and other wild musings relatively unmoderated.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The hundreds of self-appointed citizen journalists and activists uploading firsthand reports from the ground regarding the protests in Seattle eclipsed the coverage by commercial media outlets, at times causing the site to crash as user hits soared into the millions. This moment signaled a sea change in relations between online news and the major news media. Once considered a backwater for wayward anarchists, academics, artists, and lovers of porn, the Internet revealed its power to report breaking news rapidly in ways that legacy media organizations struggled to emulate.

would be hard pressed to attend an action during the early 2000s and not see copies of *Turbulence* circulating. Many of its essays provided critical reflections on the movement.

By 2006, 200 Indymedia chapters stretched across the globe, mostly located in urban centers. But the alter-globalization movement, with which Indymedia was always inextricably intertwined, faced worldwide historic challenges by 2009. The 2001 attacks of September 11th on the World Trade Center provided the United States government with an alibi to criminalize once protected protest activities and flex its military might internationally under the guise of “the war on terror.” A war in Iraq, based upon conjured evidence of weapons of mass destruction and the Bush administration’s Islamophobic conflation of Iraq with Al-Qaeda support, raged on and accompanied another war in Afghanistan. The larger concerns of the alter-globalization movement regarding the environment, economy, and self-determination of various disenfranchised communities became eclipsed by antiwar organizing.

Web 1.0, where Indymedia planted its roots, transformed into a more business-friendly configuration where commercial media sites like Facebook and Twitter corralled the open publishing format forged by Indymedia. In their turn, these giants plundered user data and monetized individuals’ faith in the democratic ways of the Internet. It seemed Indymedia had sacrificed countless hours of free labor building the wealth of the tech giants and now could no longer compete with the slick designs and easy access of these new sites. Finally, a devastating worldwide economic recession metastasized out of a housing bubble in 2007.



The protests against the Republican National Convention in New York City in 2004 where groups like I-Witness Video Collective and Glass Bead Collective provided critical independent video coverage regarding the protests, the convention, and police retaliation against protesters. (Image by Ted Warren, AP)

Exuberant visions that foresaw a shimmering wave of progressive social movements faded into dour reflections on a passing moment. A writer in *Turbulence*, one of the countless magazines inspired by the alter-globalization movement, encapsulated the disillusionment at the time:

“The movement had never existed. It was a mirage, produced in a moment of hugely and rapidly increased capacity of communication and coordination, and wide-eyed astonishment at a just-discovered capacity to produce movements of convergence whose collective power was much greater than the sum of its parts.”[2]

Yet as Noemi Klein presciently warned:

“Our activism has been declared dead before. Indeed, it is declared dead with ritualistic regularity before and after every mass demonstration: our strategies apparently discredited, our coalitions divided, our arguments misguided.”[3]

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| <p>During the 2008 Republican National Convention, eight people were initially arrested and charged with domestic terrorism for providing a webpage where protests against the convention could be coordinated. From left to right are: Rob Czernik, Erik Oseland, Monica Bicking, Eryn Trimmer, Luce Guillen-Givins, Garrett Fitzgerald, Nathanael Secor, Max Specktor.</p> | <p>The RNC Welcoming Committee produced a tongue-in-cheek video <i>We're Getting Ready</i> (2007) that imagines the Minneapolis community populated by anarchists.</p> |
|  |  |
| <p><i>We're Getting Ready</i> was used as evidence against the RNC 8 in court with the state portraying the parody as a serious threat identifying scenes of an anarchist with a Molotov cocktail used to light a charcoal grill as evidence. The humorlessness of the state and its ability to manipulate video evidence to its own ends should not be underestimated.</p> | |

Many of us, including myself at the time, mistook quietude for quiescence. But John DH Downing cautions that often dormant moments of social movement activity serve as “a crucial germinal ‘winter’ for reflection, critique, regrouping and redefinition.”[4] The fruits of this latency can be witnessed, for example, in the ways in which Indymedia people established the infrastructure for livestreaming of Occupy Wall Street. Leading up to that movement, Vlad Teichberg, a derivatives trader gone rogue, abandoned Wall Street to form an independent media group called the Glass Bead Collective; this was in 2001 in the wake of the momentum produced by Indymedia and the alter-globalization movement.[5] That group provided video coverage of many counter-summit protests, most notably the 2004 RNC in New York City and 2008 RNC in Minneapolis-St. Paul. During the 2008 RNC, Glass Bead teamed up with Twin Cities Indymedia to produce the film *Terrorizing Dissent* (2008) that chronicled in detail the repression against counter-summit organizers and independent media.[6]

Eventually Indymedia New York City and the Glass Bead Collective frayed apart due to activist burnout and political and tactical differences. But Teichberg nonetheless cashed in the last of his savings to found Global Revolution in 2011 to



Occupy Wall Street inspired thousands of people to engage in non-hierarchical organizing. Documentary filmmaker Jem Cohen captures the creative activity OWS fostered. The framing of the shot away from people's faces emphasizes the equality between people that the movement aspired towards. (from *Gravity Hill Newsreels: Occupy Wall Street, No. 5*, Jem Cohen, 2011)

provide livestreaming for Occupy Wall Street. [7] How constellations of participants from earlier grassroots media movements might flood into the rising tides of newer ones can take numerous forms—something academics have not tracked well. But what at a distance appear to be dormant moments often reveal themselves as hidden eddies of activity at the micro-level—as media activists and community organizers strategize in basements, apartments, and bars, over the Internet and on the streets awaiting the right moment to stake their ground and make their visions a reality.

This dossier explores some of the core formations digital media activism has used during the last twenty years. Here I primarily explore instances from a Global North and Western context that nonetheless gestures towards wider trends and provides a few instances of analysis of movements beyond my geographical terrain. The mini-essays that comprise this dossier can be read in any order—although readers with little to no knowledge regarding digital media activism should read the first two sections to familiarize themselves with core terms utilized throughout the mini-essays. Similarly, if one wants to understand some of the central causes behind the eruption of digital media activism of the past twenty years, see [Part I: Small Media and the Global Eruption of New Digital Movements](#). It is also worth noting that Part I provides one of the few sections analyzing non-Western media activism in depth; it focuses on the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 and the Mosireen Collective's importance in assisting that revolution and offering sophisticated reportage of it over global media.

The remainder of the mini-essays should be read in any order that grips the reader's interest. Below I briefly summarize each mini-essay and identify some of the core groups investigated within them.

[Part II. Connective Action as a New Form of Digital Media Activism](#)

Some communication scholars assert that a new logic of connective action has arisen with digital media activists' reliance upon "social" media. [8] This kind of connectivity operates within highly individualized forms of digital media activism that relay personal narratives across "social" media to organize protests. Two primary examples are the #Karen videos and elite TikTok participants organizing against Donald Trump's June 2020 Tulsa rally.

[Part III. Collective and Connective Action: Grassroots Media and Movements](#)

Although connective action provides an important occasion to theorize how digital media activism has transformed older forms of media activism, this section emphasizes the importance and persistence of older forms of collective organizing that still structure much digital media activism. Although this older dynamic is not readily observable online, it becomes apparent when speaking with organizers on the ground. This section focuses on Somali American Youth resistance in Minneapolis against both government repression and Islamophobic stereotypes perpetuated by commercial media. Furthermore, it shows how new community media organizations like Unicorn Riot, direct descendants of Indymedia, provide key assistance to grassroots movements like Minnesota's Somali American youth.

[Part IV. Livestreaming: A New Form of Media Activism](#)

Scholars like Angela Aguayo have posited livestreaming as a new form of mobile

cinema that allows underrepresented groups to directly represent their interests and issues. Although much scholarship about and coverage of livestreaming tends to focus on progressive movements, the Alt-Right has enthusiastically embraced this new platform as well. This section once again turns towards Unicorn Riot but here analyzes their livestreaming of Alt-Right rallies such as the “Liberate Minnesota” protests of April 17, 2020. Through close analysis of one of their livestreams I indicate the ways in which anarchist interests (since Unicorn Riot primarily identifies as an anarchist media organization) and the Alt-Right uncomfortably intersect. The section also explores the ways in which livestreaming can offer a much more nuanced understanding of the diverse constituencies and interests of the people who go to such protests.

[Part V. Intersections Between Commercial Media and Digital Media Activism: Copwatching](#)

The final mini-essay focuses on Copwatch Patrol Unit (CPU), a group of Hispanic copwatchers located in New York City. Here I want to explore how digital media activists use various media platforms and technologies to assist their organizing. For example, this group utilizes New York City Police Department’s crime-map database to help focus attention against police abuse as well as harnesses YouTube’s archival power to make available their innumerable accounts of police harassment against various local communities. Furthermore, they briefly teamed up with Black Entertainment Television to create a reality tv series, *Copwatch America*, until executives became uncomfortable with the content and cancelled the show. CPU are not unique in the ways in which their digital media activism utilizes both non-commercial and commercial platforms, but their story exemplifies the fraught terrain that accompanies such attempts.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Dossier on connective and collective practices— Small media activism in the twenty-first century

Links to parts of the dossier:

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Part I: Small media and the global eruption of new digital movements



Michael Chanan speaks about “small media” as accessible media that social movements employ during distinct historical moments. The video camcorder, for example, served as small media for ACT UP during the late 1980s and early 1990s. (from *Like a Prayer*, DIVA TV, 1989)

Although innumerable factors converge to define a specific historical conjuncture, two central ones in configuring media activism of the twenty-first century are:

- the increased access to cheap digital media-making technology globally, and
- the devastating impact of the 2007-2009 Global Recession that cast even more people into precarity.

Michael Chanan has usefully situated this rise of handheld digital media-making technology in a longer historical trajectory of what he calls “small media.” It’s an intentionally vague term that “overlaps with alternative media, participatory media, social movement media, etc.” [9] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Small media means different things in different historical contexts. For example, guerilla radio represented small media during the Cuban revolution. Camcorders and video tapes served as core small media during the late 1980s and early 1990s for ACT UP and various animal rights groups. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, cellphones and “social” media platforms have dominated much global media activism to become central small media technologies. [10] This is not to say that other older forms of media activism are not important like word-of-mouth, leafleting, and the like. But many of the most visible, dramatic global actions have relied upon cellphone and “social” media in their organizing and promotion.

Chanan stresses that small media “flourish in the margins and the interstices of the public sphere” and often oppose “big media which represent power and authority.” [11] Yet, he cautions,

“‘big’ and ‘small’ media do not form two separate and disconnected spheres—they impinge and encroach upon each other in complex and dynamic ways.” [12]

Such a warning can be no better illustrated than our present moment where the small media being harnessed by social movements and community groups also serve as nodal points and profit centers for late capitalism. Businesses exploit the same platforms to tame a neoliberal workforce to serve employers' needs, and they surveil users to data-mine them for profits and track their movements.

The Global Recession exacerbated the socio-economic inequities of the last fifty years. As David Harvey and Thomas Picketty have demonstrated, working-and-middle-class wealth and wages have been plundered since the 1970s as the most wealthy increase their fortunes.[13] Within the United States, for example, the Great Recession halved the wealth of lower income whites and middle-class Blacks and Hispanics.[14] Economics professor Peter Temin has deemed this moment that of "the vanishing middle class." [15] Increased policing and incarceration serve as essential institutions in disciplining those caught in precarity and joblessness. As Temin notes, "Incarceration grew fastest in those states where jobless rates were highest." [16] Sociologist Loïc Wacquant even more strongly argues that



Students were some of the first groups mobilizing against austerity measures being promoted by power elites after the 2007 Great Recession. Berkeley students, for example, employed the "occupy" slogan two years prior to the emergence of Occupy Wall Street (from *Occupied Berkeley: The Taking of Wheeler Hall*, 2011)

"the irresistible ascent of the penal state in the United States over the past three decades responds not to the rise in crime—which remained roughly constant overall before sagging at the end of the period—but to the dislocations provoked by the social and urban retrenchment of the state and by the imposition of precarious wage labor as a new norm of citizenship for those trapped at the bottom of the polarizing class structure." [17]

Likewise, the social safety net of public education, housing, and welfare have been slashed by governments to whom poverty no longer represents a social ill to be eradicated but instead something to be criminalized.

Early tremors of resistance could be felt at key socio-economic pressure points. Tuition and student fees at public universities ballooned, igniting student protest across the globe in the United States, England, Puerto Rico, Austria, Chile, and Canada.[18] The "Occupy" self-identification started gaining traction in 2009, two years before Occupy Wall Street, as students at UC-Berkeley held signs proclaiming "Occupy Berkeley" as they barricaded themselves in Wheeler Hall. [19]

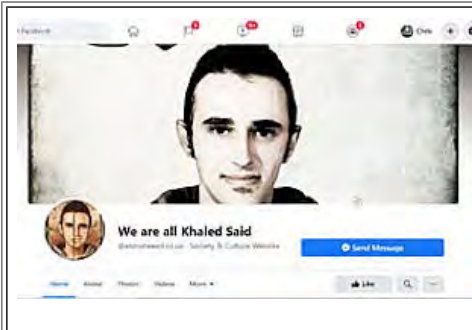
Likewise, conservative circles launched the Tea Party Movement in 2009. At the time, many commentators dismissed the movement as nothing more than "Astroturf," since the Koch-fueled Americans for Prosperity played a heavy hand in supporting Tea Party rallies and Fox News in promoting them. However, such dismissals failed to acknowledge the genuine fears and outrage that movement built upon—recognizing and responding to economic precarity, the concentration of wealth, and white racial resentment. The Tea Party movement in many ways signaled how various socio-economic strata of white communities were mobilizing



The mostly white Tea Party protests of 2009 in many ways anticipated the rise of the alt-right as various strata of white communities mobilized around the twin poles of racial resentment and economic uncertainty. (Image by Emmanueal Dunand)

around the twin poles of racial resentment and economic uncertainty that would usher in Donald Trump to the Presidency seven years later.[20] For that Astroturf to take root, it needed and found soil to be planted upon.

2011 signals the high water mark so far for global revolts and digital media activism in the twenty-first century. Although there had already been global unrest before this year, it dramatically came into focus as uprisings ignited across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which then inspired further revolts across the globe with the United Kingdom, Spain, and the United States occupying central positions early on. Western journalists have often fetishized the role of digital technology in mobilizing people in MENA countries to such an extent that the Iranian “Green Revolution” was at times distilled to the phrase “twitter revolution.” And Google executive Wael Ghonim’s presence loomed large over the Egyptian protests as if his highly influential Facebook page channeled all protest action.[21] Many non-Western protesters from Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Turkey found such framing counterproductive as it eclipsed a longer history of revolt behind the presumed silicon luster of Western “social” media platforms coming to the rescue. As a result, these protesters would often downplay the importance of “social” media platforms when interviewed by journalists.[22]



Google executive Wael Ghonim created a Facebook page to slain Egyptian protester Khaled Said. The page became a hub of activity, but it often became the main focus of most journalists who overlooked more subtle and offline forms of organizing and activism.



The protests in Tahrir Square strongly signaled a new, powerful wave of activism emerging out the financial crash of 2007 that would spread across the globe. (AP image)

The reality on the ground, however, was much more complicated. The increasing availability of cellphone technology and the translation of “social” media platforms into Arabic certainly did play an important role in organizing various uprisings through the viral circulation of state atrocities and civil resistance as well as coordinating actions. As Paolo Gerbaudo has documented, “social” media helped choreograph collective action. But he also stresses

“how social media use must be understood as complementing existing forms of face-to-face gatherings (rather than substituting for them), but also as a vehicle for the creation of new forms of proximity and



The Mosireen Collective employed both digital technology and physical spaces to assist in training a new generation of media activists as well as archiving their material.

face-to-face interaction.”[23]

The Mosireen Collective provides a good example to demonstrate the multifaceted ways in which Egyptian protesters mobilized “social” media in synch with other more traditional forms of organizing. The collective was founded by children of the Egyptian diaspora who were located across the globe but felt the gravitational pull of the uprising occurring in Tahrir Square during the early days of the revolution. Relatively well off, well connected, and cosmopolitan, the collective initially provided a central archiving function by collecting and distributing handheld video footage of resistance and state repression documented by protesters. The group eventually became mostly well-known for their web savvy presence and digital media-making skills in creating short, well-produced agitational videos. At one moment, their YouTube page became the most visited non-profit channel. They also created an Indiegogo page to support their activities and they also established their own non-commercial sites to break with the commercialized logic and algorithms of “social” media.[24] Commercial news media routinely interviewed the collective’s members, given their photogenic youthful look and adept ability to handle the press.



Mosireen Collective, a center of media activism during the Egyptian revolution, utilized social media like YouTube to publicize their videos to a worldwide audience.



But the Mosireen Collective nonetheless remained highly aware that they needed a physical presence on the ground in Cairo to remain accessible to most Egyptians who lacked Internet access. They rented an office in downtown Cairo where they offered free skill-sharing classes in video documentation, hosted screenings and discussion, and loaned their space for protesters to use.[25] Collective members participated in Tahrir Cinema, a nightly film screening held over months in Tahrir Square, where images of the revolution were projected upon a hanging sheet as the activists rerouted electricity from utility poles to fuel their equipment.[26] As Philip Rizk observes, Mosireen was

“never content with the focus on the Internet audience; the Internet after all is not accessible to the majority of Egyptians and certainly not to those who we most sought to engage with”[27]



Mosireen Collective also employed crowdsourcing fundraising tactics by creating an Indiegogo page.

Although much of this on-the-ground activity flew under the radar of Western media accounts, it nonetheless became a fairly routine practice defining the media infrastructure of many of the global rebellions at the time.[28]

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| Mosireen Collective occupied space in downtown Cairo to provide a central location for screenings, skill sharing workshops, and free space for other activists to use. (Image by Mosireen Collective) | Tahrir Cinema became a hub of activity where people congregated to watch protest videos together. Many people had no access to the internet, so Tahrir Cinema became one of the few venues where they could see videos going viral globally. Additionally, the screenings provided a location for collective organizing. (Crowdsourced image) |

At roughly the same time, the political Right reconfigured itself into what would eventually morph into the alt-right and alt-light. In 2014 Gamergate marked a watershed moment where Internet trolls ganged up upon and harassed Anita Sarkeesian, a gamer herself, for her mild-mannered feminist critique of how many games adopted sexist stances that objectified women and used a white, male gaze. Angela Nagle relates the centrality of Gamergate in bringing “gamers, rightist chan culture, anti-feminism, and the online far right closer to mainstream discussion”[29] The misogyny exhibited during Gamergate then distended into a conspiratorial, anti-institutional worldview where reactionary political outlooks cloaked themselves in irony and meme culture.[30]

I witnessed these twin political poles of digital media activism during protest events against the 2012 Republican National Convention in Tampa. In a bus mostly populated by activists affiliated with EarthFirst! and the Occupy movement, miniaturized screens occasionally winked to life as activists tested the reliability of their handheld video cameras or video capabilities of their smart phones. We were riding to a local nuclear power plant that we planned on swarming against and locking down.



Anita Sarkeesian, a host and writer for *Feminist Frequency*, offered a mild feminist critique of sexism found in a various video games in 2014. The blowback from the mostly male and white

gamer community was quick, intense, and misogynistic. The episode became known as #gamergate and signaled a growing phenomenon of reactionary Alt-Right culture that considered women, minorities, and anyone else not white and male as a threat to their masculinity and autonomy.



The police far outnumbered protesters during the 2012 RNC in Tampa. Although there were relatively few arrests, the police presence was overwhelming and intimidating. (Image by Tom Pennington/Getty Images)



An improvised stage set up within a protest camp during the 2012 Republican Nation Convention in Tampa. The camp was called “Romneyville” in ode to the ramshackle homeless encampments named “Hooversvilles” that dotted the U.S. landscape during the 1930s, suggesting parallels between the Great Depression and the Great Recession. The encampment was a hotbed of both digital and on-the-ground activism,

Caught up in the youthful energy as activists nervously regaled each other by recounting past protest actions and scrawled important phone numbers on their forearms in case of arrest, I snapped a picture of the bustling activity and posted it online. Roughly a minute or two later, someone who had invited me to the event crouched by my seat at the back of the bus. They informed me that I needed to remove my online picture since it compromised the anonymity of many on the bus. I dutifully did so, somewhat embarrassed at my carelessness. Despite writing countless pieces critiquing the surveillance of “social” media, I found myself uncritically drawn to its allure in the moment to post an image that jeopardized the safety of those around me.

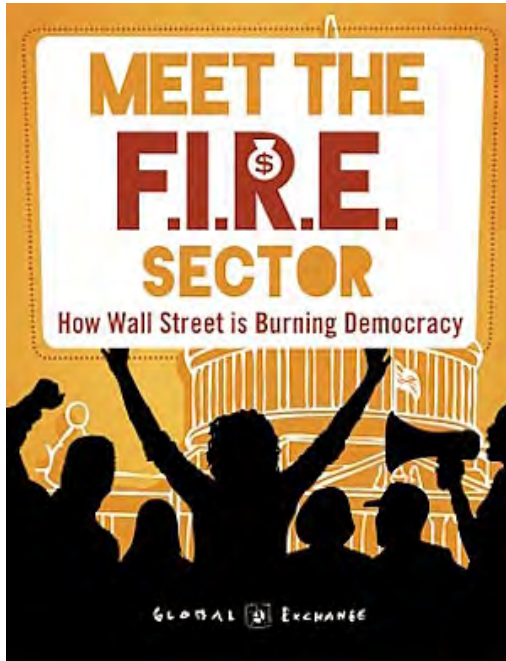
Around an hour later, we finally arrived about a mile and a half outside of the power plant. The police blocked the road. But we flooded out of the bus and around barricades, snaking down a dirt road that led to the plant. Concerned about what awaited us, I called a friend who viewed a livestream of those who’d already secured themselves at the power plant. He confirmed my worst fears: a phalanx of cops guarded the plant. I was not alone among us who had distant friends and accomplices scouring livestreams to relay important information back to us. For example, my friend informed me that he heard that the police would release the six protesters who locked themselves down in front of the power plant if we all left. It took another twenty minutes for this information to officially reach us at the protest site. This moment exemplifies the nimble ways in which digital media activism intersects and informs on-the-ground protest actions. Such activism does not simply provide vital documentation of protest actions, but it can be harnessed to inform the actions of those participating in the protests. Despite uninformed critiques often levelled against online activism as meaningless slacktivism, the bleeding together of protest actions both online and offline are more typical of the complex ways digital media activism is leveraged by social movements.[31]

While progressive activism occupied a central visible presence at the 2012 RNC with marches and lockdowns, clusters of black-clad, white-skinned anarchists ambling about, and a protest camp full of tents in downtown Tampa, the alt-right quietly infiltrated targeted spaces and events. For example, the nonprofit group Elect Democracy held a workshop at a local café populated by protesters due to its vegan menu and close proximity to the action. The workshop’s title, “How Wall Street Is Burning Democracy,” misleadingly suggested an incendiary critique of capitalism and how to fight it. Instead, participants found themselves mired in a rather milquetoast presentation of a study produced by Global Exchange that offered observations everyone already knew: finance, real estate, and insurance sectors control Wall Street.

Yet the workshop’s title unintentionally baited the flash-in-the-pan libertarian video outlet, Revealing Politics, to “infiltrate” it. I place “infiltrate” in quotes since the group’s two members stuck out like sore thumbs. They dressed in button-down designer shirts with one guy brandishing what appeared to be a Rolex on his wrist, not exactly your normal grungy Left activist garb. They swaggered into the room sitting at the far end of the table before announcing that they were going to tape the workshop if all were okay with it. Against our better judgment, we approved.

Throughout the presentation the infiltrators periodically peppered belligerent questions to derail conversation and provoke a reaction: “What’s wrong with capitalism?” “Why can’t I decide alone what to do with my money?” and “Isn’t America about capitalism anyway?” Unfortunately, they were already beaten to the punch by two older unemployed people, a man and woman, who continued to ramble about the power elite. The two were clearly overwhelmed by their situations and feeling helpless, using the workshop to give voice to all their pent-

embodying the ways in which collective and connective action complement one another. (Photo by the author)



The provocative title of a rather milquetoast presentation nonetheless lured in the reactionary video group Revealing Politics, which attempted to disrupt a workshop already in disarray. Inspired by Brietbart and Project Veritas, many conservative video groups flourished during this time period and anticipated the rising tide of the Alt-Right.



James O'Keefe is the founder of Project Veritas, which is one of the original far-right disinformation media organizations. They were responsible for the community group ACORN losing federal funding as O'Keefe posed undercover and shot a highly edited video that claimed ACORN supported smuggling young women into the country as prostitutes. More recently, Project Veritas pushed unsubstantiated claims about election rigging during the 2020

up frustrations. The inexperienced moderator allowed the situation to spiral out of control.

Realizing that they were hopelessly being upstaged, the two men stood up and announced that they were from Revealing Politics and had taped the whole workshop. But the significance of their action was lost on us since all they had on tape was an underwhelming presentation with occasional outbursts by themselves and the two other older attendees. Self-satisfied, they dramatically left the workshop. Needless to say, no footage ever appeared.

Despite Revealing Politics' bumbling attempt to provide incriminating footage of "the Left," its very existence rode a cresting wave of such conservative, bare bones, alternative media outlets, with Project Veritas and Breitbart News holding the most notorious positions. Such organizations represented only the beginnings of a younger generation of conservatives seizing control of handheld digital technology and "social" media that might outflank progressives' use of it. The algorithms of YouTube favored their high octane, sound bite friendly, hate-filled jeremiads. They repackaged reactionary points-of-view through catchy memes and "ironic" stances that allowed them to disavow responsibility for their messages. They created the art of "red-pilling," a reference to *The Matrix* when someone takes a drug to confront their reality head-on. In this instance, red-pilling means providing crossover content to appeal to a wide audience that can then be converted to a more conservative viewpoint.[32] Popular culture serves as the ideal terrain to do this, as cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall have long known.[33] For example, rightwing YouTube videos may focus on the popular *Star Wars* or *Mad Max* franchise as excuses to critique feminism and defend sexist views.[34] They stake out cultural terrain to implant ideas that can gradually convert users into adherents to their way of thinking.

A new generation of digital media activists on all political sides has taken root—with the alt-right gaining traction and leading us to the present moment. They galvanized themselves to storm the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 during the counting of Electoral College votes. Only belatedly did tech giants acknowledge how their large-scale media platforms played into promoting this toxic, delusional culture, and so they belatedly either temporarily or permanently banned Donald Trump and his followers from them as well as de-platform apps like Parler where the alt-right congregated. But the Internet is still littered with livestream accounts, Facebook and Twitter posts where individuals proudly display their invasion of the U.S. Capitol.[35]

Bans are only a temporary solution as new apps and platforms get founded to host the alt-right; entertainment organizations like Newsmax and One America News serve as oases for alt-right and alt-light people who feel that Fox News hewed too close to reality by acknowledging Joseph Biden's presidential victory despite Donald Trump's bluster to intimidate the network to admit otherwise. We have entered into a new mediascape where we no longer have the luxury of ignoring reactionary content but need to confront it directly because of the concrete impact it now has.



election. (Image by Sameul Corum/Getty Images)

Breitbart News Service serves as a hub of conspiratorial, racist, and sexist videos and essays. Steve Bannon co-founded Breitbart in 2007. He briefly served as chief strategist for the Trump administration from 2017-2018, revealing how influential such disinformation media organizations have become politically.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Dossier on connective and collective practices— Small media activism in the twenty-first century

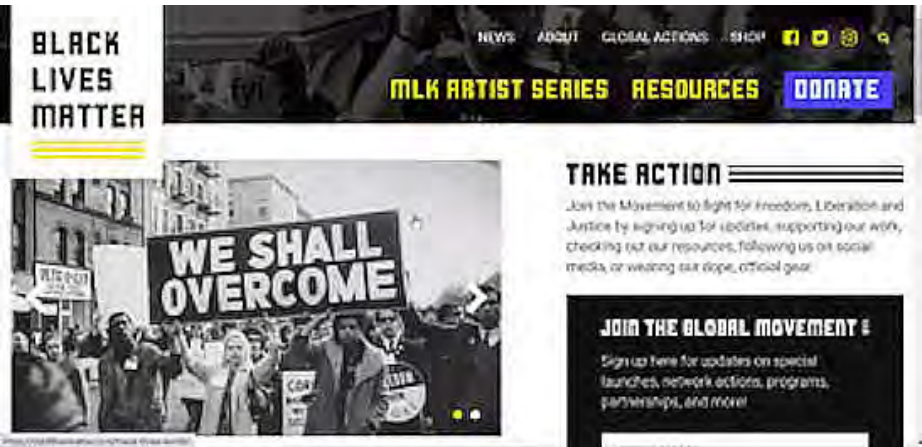
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Part II: Connective action as a new form of digital media activism

Some communication scholars have suggested that a new logic of connective action has arisen with the reliance upon “social” media by digital media activists. [36] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Unlike prior modes of collective action that revolve around group solidarity and an explicitly political frame work, this new modality prioritizes “highly individualized publics” relaying personalized narratives across “social” media to organize protests. W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg observe that connective action networks

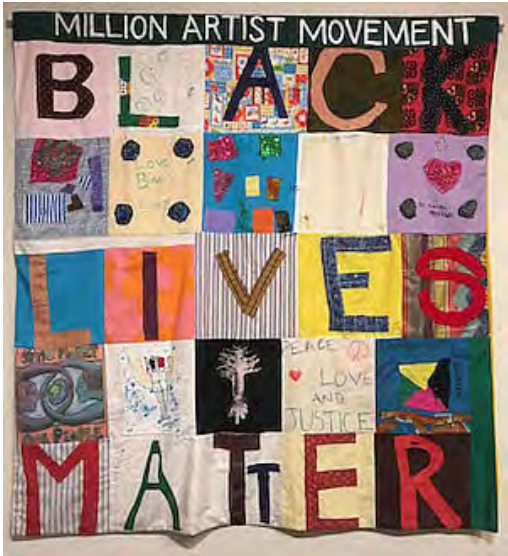
“involve co-production and co-distribution, revealing a different economic and psychological logic: peer production and sharing based on personalized expression.”[37]



Black Lives Matter became a galvanizing force in 2013 in mobilizing a new wave of activists from LGBTQ and communities of color. Although women of color and queer women had often played central roles in activism across the United States, #BLM drew attention to their importance front and center.

Hashtag activism embodies a core instance of connective action at work. As scholars like Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault argue,

“Twitter hashtags have become an important platform for historically disenfranchised populations to advance counter-narratives and advocate for social change.”[38]



The Million Artists Movement used quilting to connect movements together. The quilts “embody the extensive power we the people have to resist, rise up, celebrate, honor, dismantle, revolt, imagine, heal, and build together,” according a written statement at the Minneapolis Minnesota of Art. This quilt reveals the centrality of Black Lives Matter in inspiring these movements and connecting them together. (Image by author)



Amy Cooper’s actions of calling the police on a black man who asked her to leash her dog became an iconic instance of #Karen videos circulating across the internet during the summer of 2020. Such videos reveal casual and unpredictable ways in which racism and white privilege can manifest itself in the lives of people of color. (Cell phone footage by Christian Cooper)

#BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #TimesUp, #FastTailedGirls, and #SayHerName, to name only a few trending hashtags, all had tremendous impact on changing the framing of issues globally as well as making some concrete changes in disrupting the traditional balances of power against various disenfranchised communities. Yet, as mentioned earlier, all of these instances of hashtag activism must be accompanied by offline actions as well to start enacting the change that they want to see. #BlackLivesMatter is not simply a hashtag. It has many local chapters stretched across the United States and elsewhere with mixed results, between playing a vibrant role in community activism and being opportunistically co-opted by the Democratic Party.[39] Furthermore, #BlackLivesMatter has inspired the creation of many new youth groups in its wake that might not fall under its name but have been influenced by its political outlook, tactics, and strategies.

#Karen

The spate of #Karen videos over the summer of 2020 reveals a different way in which the logic of connective action works. Through a personal affront by a white woman usually from a middle-class background, the person filming, often a person of color, documents systemic racism and class privilege manifesting itself through the confrontation. #Karen videos circulate over “social” media to shame the “Karen” being documented, which can result in loss of employment or potential arrest of the women filmed.

The documentation of Amy Cooper’s belligerent behavior in Central Park against Christian Cooper (no relation) reveals how easily white entitlement can summon the performativity of white female victimhood against a person of color.[40] After being asked to leash her dog from a distance, she rapidly approaches him saying in a clipped voice, “I am asking you to stop.” He requests that she not approach him, which she ignores while aggressively pointing at him stating, “I am calling the cops. I am going to tell them that there is an African American man threatening my life.” The intentionality and racist weight behind her words stresses how she will leverage his race to factor into the call, summoning up a long history of African American males being scapegoated for violence against and by whites.[41]

The next moment disturbingly shows Amy Cooper’s easy metamorphosis from aggressor into “victim.” as she contacts 911. She speaks into her cellphone while unintentionally choking her dog on its leash claiming, “There is an African American man. I am in Central Park. He is recording me and threatening myself and my dog.” The dog visibly struggles under her tightened grip as she channels all her energy into the call. Seemingly not receiving the desired response, she quickly modulates her voice into a more hysterical timbre, yelling, “I am being threatened by a man in a bramble! Please send the cops immediately!” After she ends her performance, he states, “Thank you.”

What uniquely marks many of the #Karen videos is the unexpectedly mundane way in which the confrontation arises: parking one’s car; walking through the park; buying an item. Unlike the documentation of state violence by the police or other authorities documented by copwatchers and other groups, the #Karen videos chronicle the casual way white privilege and racism circulate and manifest themselves through everyday life. The videos are powerful reminders that no space is innocent and that the lives of people of color can be upended at any given moment.



The rising number of #Karen compilations suggest mixed motives for posting and viewing them, ranging from critiques of white privilege to misogyny against white women.

The #Karen videos extend from a much longer history of euphemisms Blacks have employed to identify entitled, clueless, and abusive white women. “Miss Ann” circulated among antebellum African American communities to identify such women. “Becky” became a popularized phrase during the 1990s to signal similar privilege.[42] However, these earlier euphemisms circulated predominantly among Black communities. The viral nature of #Karen videos, on the other hand, have become fodder for popular consumption. YouTube is populated with #Karen compilations. User comments reveal different motives for watching such videos: boredom, critiques of white privilege, misogyny against white women, racists defending their privilege.[43] Many have expressed concern that the glut of such videos has boomeranged around to rationalize “progressive” misogyny against white women.[44]

The ambiguous ways in which the #Karen meme circulates dramatically exposes the limitations of what happens when memes get caught in the eddies of “social” media. Historically, activist video had revolved around a politics of visibility, of drawing attention to marginalized lives and communities in order to enact concrete positive changes by in part altering the public discourse surrounding them. But, as media studies scholar Alexandra Juhasz notes, in the age of “social” media a new question arises:

“If visibility was once a goal, what is its political function in a time of user-made image-oversaturation or, to put it differently, a time of hypervisibility for the once visually disenfranchised?”[45]

The #Karen meme reveals how easily “social” media platforms and commercial media in general can quickly monetize trauma and evidence of micro-aggressions and explicit violence into a reactionary entertainment context.

TikTok and Trump

Furthermore, it is difficult to disentangle “social” media’s self-congratulatory hype from actual impact. Recently members from elite TikTok celebrated their allegedly sabotaging Donald Trump’s June 2020 Tulsa rally by advocating that followers purchase free tickets when they never planned on attending. Those promoting this digital disruption scrubbed their posts between 24 to 48 hours before in order to keep their intentions hidden from outsiders. When only 6000 people attended the rally within a 19,000 seat stadium, TikTokers claimed credit. [46]

But many factors could have negatively impacted the rally’s numbers besides TikTok users, such as a raging pandemic and the fact that six Trump staffers tested positive for COVID-19 before the event.[47] Although Trump personnel claimed a million people had signed up for the rally, one should not necessarily assume such claims are based on inflated numbers produced by TikTok users registering for it but instead upon a deeply delusional administration that holds no shame in exaggerating the truth. Remember that Trump and his staff deemed his inauguration as having the largest attendance ever despite visible evidence revealing otherwise.[48]

Even though Trump administration officials claimed that TikTok had no negative impact upon the rally, one can’t help but notice the timing of Trump’s plan to ban TikTok and WeChat from operating within the United States shortly after the Tulsa fiasco, which suggests a retaliatory move. This says less about TikTok users



Founded in 2016, TikTok has engaged a new generation of activists. It has become a central media platform for #BLM protests and other youth led movements. (Crowd sourced image)

actually negatively impacting the Tulsa rally than about the first President of the United States to be fully jacked into the artery of “social” media, which he regards as his lifeblood and main conduit to reach his base so any online threat must be challenged immediately.



TikTok users like Mary Jo Laupp created an online campaign to sabotage Donald Trump's 2020 rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma by reserving seats for an event they never planned on attending. It is debatable if TikTok users actually negatively impacted rally attendance or if it was due to the sheer incompetency of the Trump administration Either way, Trump considered the threat real and soon afterwards threatened banning TikTok from the United States.

In its own convoluted ways, TikTok users did impact Trump. Their claims about disrupting his rally, regardless of being true or false, nonetheless triggered the President to falsely proclaim TikTok as a threat to national security and demand its sale despite the protections the app takes against Chinese censorship—unlike its sister app WeChat that has been more vulnerable to Chinese government interference[49] So this episode can also be read as a cautionary tale of unintended consequences that often result from online actions.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Dossier on connective and collective practices— Small media activism in the twenty-first century

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Part III: Collective and connective action: grassroots media and movements

Most instances of social movement-based digital media activism are collective in scope as well as connective, and they traverse across many forms of media that build off of the on-the-ground organizing. [50] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Sasha Costanza-Chock calls this *transmedia* organizing and correctly points out how social movements have always been doing this type of work—even before the advent of the Internet, but it has become more visible as of lately. [51] Such organizing utilizes multiple platforms while involving the movement’s base in participatory media-making and in seizing “concrete opportunities for action.” [52]



The Countering Violent Extremism program had been initiated during the George W. Bush administration, but it was implemented during Barack Obama’s presidency. It predominantly focuses on Muslim communities of color and initially targeted Boston, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis.



One of many community events held in Minneapolis against the federal government's Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program. Despite a majority of domestic terrorist attacks being perpetrated by the far-right and white nationalist groups, CVE predominantly targeted Muslim American communities and often employed deeply problematic “threat indicators” to identify radicalized Muslim youth. (Image by Burhan Isaaq)



Sensationalistic and Islamophobic headlines about a proposed HBO series on Somali American life in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood made many members of those communities dubious about allowing HBO to film in their neighborhoods. [Chris, send a larger image, so cropped area is at least 350 px wide]

For a media scholar to track such transmedia activism is time-intensive as one must shuttle one’s attention between campaigns occurring simultaneously online and on the streets by a wide array of participants. But a number recent studies document the multifaceted relations that exist between both realms of social movement organizing.[53] My own recent work exploring resistance movements of Somali American and other Muslim American communities within Minneapolis, Minnesota exposes a similar dynamic at work.[54] Focusing on the years between 2015-2019, I followed mobilizations against the federal government’s Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) program and wider instances of Islamophobia promoted within popular culture. CVE as an idea had been kicking around since the George W. Bush administration and was based on British models.

In the UK, law enforcement created partnerships between non-profits, schools, and local authorities to keep tabs on Muslim communities and identify any would-be radicalized individuals.[55] The British program was routinely condemned for its top-down approach that failed to substantively involve the communities it targeted, relied upon faulty assumptions regarding radicalization, further blurred lines between policing and social services, and cast Muslims as a whole as a suspect community.[56] Nonetheless the Obama administration announced in 2014 it would deploy the program in three pilot cities; Boston, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis—all allegedly centers of foreign terrorist activity. This move flew in the face of the fact that far-right and white nationalist groups have been responsible for most domestic terrorist attacks. Between 2008 and 2017, for example, the far-right produced 71 percent of extremist fatalities.[57] Yet anywhere between 80-85 percent of CVE grants were dedicated to funding Muslim American community organizations or law enforcement efforts directed towards Muslim America communities. Such a contradiction is routinely pointed out by the Muslim American communities being impacted by this program.[58]

Community groups and organizations like Young Muslim Collective, CAIR—Minneapolis, and the West Bank Community Coalition quickly organized against CVE and the local nonprofit groups that had accepted its grant money. Activists took to the streets with events such as holding meetings in the Cedar Riverside community, which has the largest Somali refugee population in the United States, to discuss CVE and to disrupt government-hosted meetings that underplayed the policing function of the program and the ways it bolsters an Islamophobic outlook.

Resistance extended to protests against an ill-timed HBO series being shot in Cedar Riverside; that series revolved around the lives of two Somali American families with a strong terrorism plot defining the show’s narrative arc. Thoughtlessly titled *The Recruiters*, HBO quickly reversed gears and renamed the show *Mogadishu, Minnesota* after Muslim American community members critiqued the original title as playing into Islamophobic stereotypes of Somali Americans as terrorists. Youth groups forced HBO creative personnel to meet with them regarding their concerns over the show’s content and the ways in which location shooting would disrupt many elders’ lives. They held a block party that confronted the show’s main creator, K’naan, a Somali Canadian rapper. They disrupted shooting. They spoke with local businesses about their concerns.

The anti-CVE and HBO campaigns dramatically converged on the ground while some community members created a #SayNOtoHBO campaign that garnered 586 signatures to stop the series.[59] Despite clearly articulating their problems with the show—such as its focus on terrorism, reliance upon stereotypes of gangsters and thugs, and disrupting community life with little-to-no economic benefits—online organizers quickly lost control of the narrative as users outside of Cedar Riverside rebranded the protests as nothing more than clan rivalries among



Somali American youth in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood organized protests against HBO's series *Mogadishu, Minnesota*, which was originally called *The Recruiters*. Despite being written by a Somali Canadian, K'naan, youth expressed concern over the Islamophobic narrative of terrorism the series perpetuated and the logistical problems shooting the series would pose upon residents of the Cedar Riverside community with little-to-no economic benefit. (frame grab from *Who Controls the Somali Narrative*, Integration TV, December 10, 2016)

Somalis or indicative of Somali Americans' generally troublesome nature.

Even worse, protest videos launched under the hashtag and posted on YouTube generated even more Islamophobic invective from racist Trump supporters who trolled online to harass nonwhite communities during an election season.[60] Such instances reveal what Henry Jenkins has called “context collapse” where carefully constructed in-group messages once made available online can be radically re-contextualized and repurposed by sympathizers and haters.[61] A similar problem occurred over Somali message boards, a central medium used among diasporic Somali communities to foster discussion around news and popular culture concerning them.[62] Some Somalis supported K'Naan in his attempts to create a show about Somali American life for a premium cable network.[63] Others saw him as selling out Somalis for the good of his own career.[64]

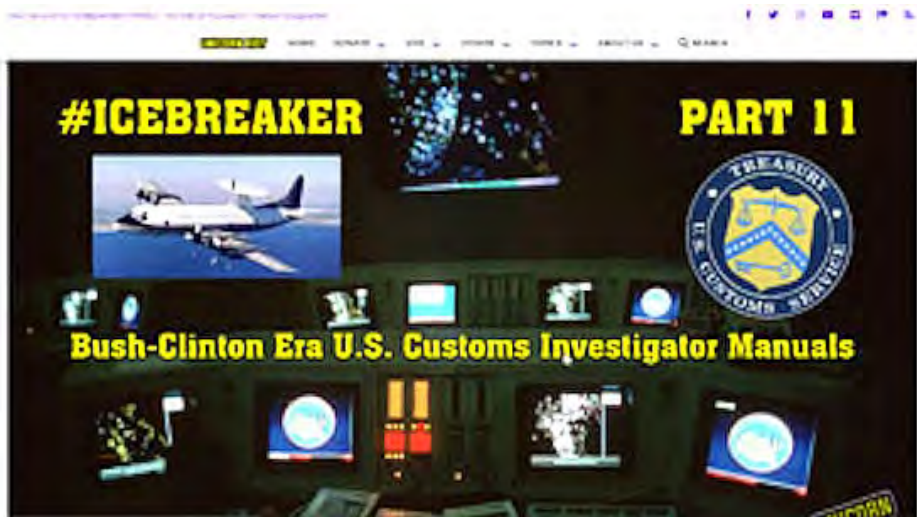


Muslim American youth waged a hashtag campaign against *Mogadishu, Minnesota* called #SayNoTo HBO. The results were mixed as Somalis outside of Cedar Riverside weren't entirely convinced that the show was a bad idea and Trump trolls hurled Islamophobic insults against Muslims users. (from *Who Controls the Somali Narrative*, Integration TV, December 10, 2016).

Looking at the #SayNoToHBO campaign alone reveals it largely failed. It never went viral or garnered wide commercial media attention that could popularize the protests. It failed to establish a unified message as supporters and detractors of the HBO series bickered with one another. But to simply assess the success or failure of protests just from “social” media would overlook the vibrant ways in which the community was mobilizing on the ground within Cedar Riverside and across the Twin Cities both to challenge the show and to expose how its outlook in many ways reinforced Islamophobic stereotypes that CVE programs capitalized upon.[65] Ultimately, the series was cancelled after shooting the pilot. How much of this decision can be attributed to the protests as opposed to other factors is unknown. But clearly the protests helped discourage the series completion.

Furthermore, those individuals responsible for the hashtag campaign were also involved in many other communication efforts that guided on-the-ground actions.

They provided behind-the-scenes research and literature for community organizers mobilizing against CVE. They wrote op-eds critiquing CVE as well. [66] They networked between multiple groups to draw connections between the interests of BlackLivesMatter protesters, philanthropists, antiwar activists, anarchists and socialists and their fight against CVE and Islamophobia. So to solely judge success or failure on the hashtag campaign is to miss how it was only one part of a much wider network of activism and communication strategies.



The grassroots, anarchist media organization Unicorn Riot gained attention for releasing classified Federal documents like the U.S. Customs Investigator manuals.

Additionally through such protests, for example, Muslim American groups forged a relation with Unicorn Riot, which is mainly located in Minneapolis and has recently garnered attention by livestreaming George Floyd protests and anti-government reopening protests as well as coverage of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017. Although known for mostly covering protests and revealing classified government documents concerning the surveillance and repression of various communities, Unicorn Riot has diligently partnered with Muslim American communities in Minneapolis. For example, it began covering Young Muslim Collective (YMC) since its origins when the group held a vigil in February 2016 for three Sudanese men killed in Indiana. Ayaan Dahir, one of YMC's founders, said,

“We were wondering why we were getting radio silence from the Muslim community. Something we expected from the larger community, but because these 2 of the 3 Sudanese boys were Muslim we were wondering why there was so much silence and no attention being paid to their murders. ... [Afterwards] we held a discussion, a community discussion about Islamophobia and anti-blackness. A lot of us are Black Muslim. I myself am. And this is something we wanted to address.” [67]

The moment served as a healing space to finally talk about these issues. One problem that people kept mentioning during the discussion was CVE. So as a result, the Young Muslim Collective was born to combat it and other manifestations of intersecting anti-Blackness and Islamophobia.

Unicorn Riot kept covering local protests around CVE and *Mogadishu, Minnesota* as well as covering African American and Muslim American cultural events within the Twin Cities. This support led to growing trust between this anarchist-inflected, grassroots media outlet and these local communities. Some of Unicorn Riot's members worked at local nonprofits that partnered with various



Islamophobia & Anti-Blackness Confronted at #OurThreeBoys Rally



Unicorn Riot teamed up with the Young Muslim Collective to cover their first vigil in February 2016 to mourn the killing of three Sudanese men in Indiana. Muslim youth in Minneapolis occupy a unique position by having a grassroots media organization like Unicorn Riot at hand willing to report on local Black and Muslim events and issues.



Unicorn Riot does not simply cover protests and government malfeasance. It also covers local events from the community like the Black Storytellers Alliance that builds connections between the organization and community members. [Christ, send a larger image so cropped area is at least 300 px wide]

disadvantaged communities.[68] I witnessed these bonds firsthand as I hung out with one of the founders of the group at a local dive bar in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood. As we conversed over drinks, community members repeatedly approached Niko Georgiades, giving him a hug, thanking him for Unicorn Riot’s coverage, and discussing other community events and how Unicorn Riot might cover them. All of the Muslim American youth activists I spoke with had nothing but positive things to say about Unicorn Riot. For example, here’s how Burhan Israfel Isaaq, one of the central community organizers within Cedar Riverside, praised them:

“Man, they have been doing great. They do a great job of reaching out to the community. They’re number one for me, man.”[69]

Although Unicorn Riot was founded in 2015, it has much longer roots that stretch back to Indymedia. Half of the crew was doing livestreaming at OWS with Global Revolution in 2011 due to the connections Glass Bead Collective had cemented with Twin Cities Indymedia during the 2008 RNC protests. Other members of Unicorn Riot had actually belonged to Twin Cities Indymedia. For Niko, the 2008 RNC

“was such an eye opening experience: they’re [the police] raiding journalists’ houses before it happened; they’re raiding people’s apartments before it happened. They’re being called a terrorist. Like what the fuck man. There was a lot of shit that really from THAT more so radicalized me into a media-maker, and half of Unicorn Riot was there.”[70]



Glass Bead Collective was founded in 2001 by Vlad Teichberg, a derivatives trader gone rogue. Out of the collective’s ashes, Teichberg founded Global Revolution that provided the technological infrastructure for Occupy Wall Street to livestream.

Unicorn Riot represents the most recent iteration of grassroots video collectives, which often embrace anarchist-inflected practices that stretch back to the late 1960s.[71] Undercurrents, SchMOVIES, SubMedia, Mosireen Collective, and Outta Your Backpack Media represent more recent configurations, but most of such groups fly under the radar during their brief and often tumultuous existences.[72]

Unicorn Riot has a media-savvy approach. They run an independent platform at <https://unicornriot.ninja/> yet also vigorously promote their coverage on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Their webpage is an inventive combination of print



Many members from Unicorn Riot gained their initial media activism chops within Twin Cities Indymedia. Although grassroots media groups like Unicorn Riot might seem to spring from whole cloth, their members actually have longer lineages with older media activism groups.

journalism, new media, and video documentation. It consolidates text to a relative minimum by hyperlinking to lengthier articles. Embedded videos run roughly around 5 minutes with longer footage often relegated to hyperlinks. They livestream events with footage that is then archived on their site for future reference. If anything, their web presence represents an inventive combination of the logics of connective and collective action. They exploit the connective links provided by “social” media while maintaining a hub of information on their own website that can be cross-referenced and establish a wider context for their stories to be understood.

But in addition to all this, they have a strong presence on the ground with community organizations and activists communities in the various cities that they are located within the United States like Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Boston, and the Bay Area. This combination of political action and communication savvy is fairly typical as we have seen in Part II when discussing the Mosireen Collective in Egypt. It suggests how digital media activism often works in concert with older forms of grassroots organizing rather than in opposition to it, as some journalists like to suggest.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Dossier on connective and collective practices— Small media activism in the twenty-first century

Links to parts of the dossier:

- [Introduction: reflections on Indymedia at a moment of uncertainty](#)
- [Part I. Small media and the global eruption of new digital movements.](#)
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Part IV: Livestreaming: a new form of media activism



Livestreaming gained tremendous popularity with the emergence of Occupy Wall Street. Many issues arise about privilege and security culture when livestreaming. OWS had to reflect on the racial and gender privileges of the person often livestreaming. Also, questions arose if it was wise to livestream meetings where some people would not want their identities widely available to the public. (Image by Henry Ferry)



As mentioned in Part III, Unicorn Riot have become particularly well known for their livestreaming of protests. Angela J. Aguayo conceptualizes livestreaming as a new form of mobile cinema where media makers “document conflict while also occupying spaces with the process of production.” [73] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Livestreaming unfolds in real-time in a highly individuated form, usually utilizing cellphone technology. Often people participating in a protest are simultaneously viewing a livestream, and this practice sets up a dizzying feedback loop between representation and participation.

Aguayo posits livestreaming as one form of vernacular cinematic discourse that articulates the language of the marginalized. She writes, “It steps in when representative government does not serve the interests of the people” [74] Although Aguayo focuses on progressive and radical political uses of this vernacular cinematic discourse, Unicorn Riot’s livestreaming of Rightwing anti-government protests reveals an interesting moment where political worlds converge. In “#Live: Protesters Demand Minnesota Re-Open,” Unicorn Riot livestreams the “Liberate Minnesota” protests of April 17, 2020, where around 500 people, mostly white, gathered together before the Governor’s residence to demand that the state re-open despite the country being overwhelmed by COVID-19 cases. [75] In a festive atmosphere, mostly unmasked protesters roam the streets waving American flags and pro-Trump signage. Others carry placards ranging in messaging from demanding re-opening to more conspiratorial cryptic cyphers along the QAnon vein. Trucks and cars parade down the streets with “Don’t Tread on Me” flags and more pro-Trump propaganda. [76]

The livestream runs for about two hours, immersing viewers in the variegated textures of the protesters’ outlooks as the livestreamer winds through clusters of people and interviews them. People’s politics there range from the deeply conspiratorial that consider COVID-19 a hoax to more moderate views of people economically suffering due to the shutdown and fearful about simply putting food

Livestreaming has become a central format in transmitting protests over “social” media and elsewhere. Unicorn Riot livestreamed the April 17, 2020 “Liberate Minnesota” rally where a small group of rightwing protesters demanded that the government reopen despite a raging pandemic. Typical of many rightwing rallies, the Founding Fathers are invoked to position their protests in the lineage of the American Revolution



Livestreaming allows viewers to immerse themselves in the rhythms of a protest action as well as gain a greater sense of the diverse participants who contribute to it. Unicorn Riot spoke to a mother and three daughters for around three minutes to get a sense of their views, which oscillated from the relatively reasonable by acknowledging COVID-19 as real and dangerous to the more reactionary like dismissing government assistance as “handouts” and not wearing masks.



The appeal to freedom and not destroying the economy are fairly common rhetorical moves made by rightwing protesters when objecting to government intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic. This placard cleverly combines both appeals together while riffing off the phrase “flatten the curve” that health experts promoted in advocating mask wearing and social distancing to avoid mass deaths. (from Unicorn Riot “Liberate Minnesota” livestream)

on their table and paying their bills. Most protesters views oscillate uncomfortably between the two poles.

A relatively more moderate outlook appears around the ten minute mark where a mom and her three daughters in their early twenties speak about re-opening. The mom wears a red “Trump 2020” hat while another daughter wears a black pro-Trump shirt. All four of them hold a cardboard sign with lettering in red, white, and blue that states: “Freedom Is Essential. Don’t Flatten the Economy,” riffing off the notion that shutdowns are necessary to flatten the curve of the pandemic. The women explain that they want to get back to work and “don’t want government handouts.” In the background we hear cars honking passing by and protesters boisterously yelling as they fraternize and wave their signage and flags.

The interviewer presses them further asking if they believe the pandemic is real. One of the daughters states, “Yes, it’s real. But we still have a right to work.” The mom continues, “A higher power that we believe in that takes care of us. And I know it’s a real thing. People are dying, and it breaks our hearts that people are dying.” When the interviewer asks if they are angry about the shutdown happening, a daughter states calmly, “No, the first shutdown was fine. It gave us two weeks for people to prepare and then open back up.”

We finally learn that one of the other daughters plans on having a wedding on May 23 and doesn’t want it postponed. The mom adds, “We’re just waiting to see how many people we can have. Or have anyway, and I guess we’ll all go to jail.”

By providing an extended amount of time to speak with the mom and daughters, Unicorn Riot provides a space to offer at least a more nuanced understanding of one set of protesters’ beliefs. These participants in the demonstration are not belligerent and yelling but rather friendly. They don’t deny the virus’s existence but also believe in a higher power protecting them. They address different elements of concern like the need for work and the desire to celebrate a special occasion. Yet they also hold a reactionary conservative outlook that considers government assistance “handouts.” This is not to say that white privilege doesn’t course through everything that they say and their actions, as they stand on the street unmasked and joking about being arrested. But the filmed interview shows the ways in which reactionary politics weaves itself into moments of more grounded reflection.

Equally interesting, while Unicorn Riot conducts the interview, around thirty seconds in a blue truck pulls behind the women speaking with another white woman standing in the truck bed, dressed in black and wearing a black hat decorated with a black-and-white American flag. Her dress makes her appear as a stereotypical anarchist until she yells to the women, “They’re hardcore anti-Trumper. Just so you know who you are talking to. Anti-Trump news media.” The mom responds calmly, “That’s alright.” Just when you expect the truck to depart, the black clad woman leans in again and speaks to the interviewer, “You guys actually do really good work. I don’t agree with your views. But I will admit you do good work.”

A vertigo ensues as her comments both chastise and praise Unicorn Riot in conducting both bad and good coverage. In many ways, her comments crystalize the contradictory stance of being pro-Trump and inherently against any anarchist grassroots news organization while also being against commercial news media and holding respect for the type of grassroots news coverage that Unicorn Riot provides. It reveals the ever shifting ideological terrain that people navigate and hints at the ways in which all progress might not be lost since people are not coherent in their political outlooks. The livestream provides the space and time for such fissures to appear by the producers diving into the protest and mingling with those around them. Interestingly enough, other than that one woman who



In an interesting twist, a protester at the “Liberate Minnesota” rally simultaneously berated Unicorn Riot for being “anti-Trumper” while simultaneously claiming that they do “good work.” Such a reaction reveals the complex ways in which Rightwing participants view anarchist grassroots media as both ideologically problematic yet nonetheless important correctives to commercial news coverage. Tellingly, most participants wanted to speak with Unicorn Riot despite knowing the group’s anarchist leanings.

partially challenges Unicorn Riot’s presence, no one else does. The rest of the protesters don’t seem to mind even though Unicorn Riot is a fairly well known anarchist media entity within the Twin Cities.

If, as Aguayo suggests, livestreaming allows communities to represent their own interests when the government fails to do so, the “Liberate Minnesota” protest reveals how the medium appeals to all types of political backgrounds. Unicorn Riot and rightwing protesters temporarily occupy the same metaphorical and literal space as they both recognize the value of protesting and the livestreaming of that protest. Regardless of Unicorn Riot’s anarchist politics, protesters don’t mind talking with them since they intuitively understand the power of livestreaming in representing fringe and marginalized voices—regardless of who wields the technology. Livestreaming embodies a medium well-suited to represent grassroots movements as they challenge the framing of commercial media and representative government. Such an outlook helps unlock the meaning behind the black clad female protester who says she disagrees with Unicorn Riot while still thinking they do good work. At least they are attempting to alter the framing by interviewing everyday people and allowing them the space to speak their minds, unlike more mainstream news framing that fits people’s voices into a prescribed format that at best provides snippets of thought but never allows for full articulation.

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Part V: Intersections between commercial media and digital media activism: Copwatching

Digital media activism of the twenty-first century traverses a fraught terrain, caught between the contradictions of representing marginalized communities and enabling state repression of them; mobilizing upon “social” media while reinforcing privatized platforms with free labor and sensitive data; challenging the framing of commercial media yet demanding coverage from it. [77] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] In some ways, this is not different from what all social movements must contend with in a capitalist world. But these movements have become increasingly dependent upon more privatized spaces of capital as “social” media has become interwoven with their practices of resistance.



Copwatch Patrol Unit was founded in 2012 as a response to the Ramarley Graham shooting as well as the daily harassment working-class communities of color suffer from the police. The group wears uniforms that assert their presence

within the communities they work within and to the police officers who surveil those communities. (Image by CPU)

Copwatch Patrol Unit (CPU) in New York City provides an illustrative example of one group negotiating such fraught terrain. Jose LaSalle founded the group in 2012 part as a response to the Ramarley Graham shooting. Graham was an unarmed black teenager from the Bronx whom the police shot to death in February 2012 after invading his apartment for his possession of a small bag of marijuana. During the same year, LaSalle's stepson Alvin recorded the cops harassing him and calling him "a fucking mutt." [78]



Jose LaSalle is the founder of Copwatch Patrol Unit. His stepson recorded being harassed by the cops and being called "a fucking mutt," which in part led LaSalle to realize the need for greater police accountability. (Image by Susan Watts)

As of 2020, CPU has patrol units in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, Staten Island, and Harlem. [79] CPU members are outfitted with a SONY handycam, cell phone, and black uniform. They often wear a black baseball hat with the letters "CPU" in white on the front. The black shirt has an iron-on of a badge on its front that states: "Copwatch Patrol Unit: Silence is Consent." "COPWATCH" in white letters runs along the back of the shirt. Cargo pants allow them to hold their equipment: cell phone, notebook, cameras, and the like. LaSalle notes,

"People see us, then they know we are copwatchers. It's similar to the Black Panthers. They had black, wear black, the beret hat, that was how people could tell the difference between them and the cops. It also lets NYPD know that we are out there to document the police and make sure that we are creating breathing room for the people."

Prior to COVID-19, CPU provided weekly trainings wherever requested. Kim Ortiz, a member of CPU, states,

"We do one in each borough each month. We go to a community center, often in communities of color that are brutalized by the police. A lot of times people contact us. We train people so they can train others so we are no longer needed, so people will have a sense of empowerment. We discuss certain things about how close you should stand to an incident, what to do if you are stopped." [80]

All of the footage that is recorded is uploaded to the cloud by the ACLU stop-and-frisk app CPU members use. All too often, when copwatchers are detained or arrested by the police, their footage is erased or damaged. By uploading to the cloud immediately, no matter what the police might do to their equipment, their footage is protected.

LaSalle emphasizes the political jujitsu CPU wields against the NYPD by using their own data gathering against them:

"CPU patrols all the precincts, particularly where the majority of Civilian Complaint Review Board complaints occur. We also look at the NYPD crime map and their posts. In the areas where crimes are being committed, we know they are going to put bigger amount of officers in that area and be aggressive. In other words, the NYPD is helping us pinpoint the locations of where we need to be with the CompStat website and the crime map. We use all these things to pinpoint their location where there will be aggressive policing based upon complaints or crimes in the area."

CompStat is a user friendly site: <https://compstat.nypdonline.org/2e5c3f4b-85c1-4635-83c6-22b27fe7c75c/view/89>. Various categories like rape, robbery, grand larceny, and burglary are listed on the left side of the display. Statistics indicate if infractions are up or down compared to the numbers occurring a year prior. When one clicks on one of the categories, a series of blue dots appear on a map of New York City to the right side of the screen to indicate where the incidents occurred.



Copwatch Patrol Unit uses NYPD's own data against them. Jose LaSalle, the group's founder, notes: "In the areas where crimes are being committed, we know they [the police] are going to put bigger amount of officers in that area and be aggressive. In other words, the NYPD is helping us pinpoint the locations of where we need to be with the CompStat website and the crime map." As one can see, the CompStat website is easy to navigate and utilize.

Unlike many copwatch groups that more selectively post their videos, CPU uploads most of their videos so one is overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the number of videos found on their YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/user/endstopandfrisknowjl/videos> . One is always aware of CPU's latest activity based upon their YouTube and Facebook pages.[81] One goal of posting all of their videos is to add substance to the statistics, to show the reality that undergirds the numbers often put out by the Office of the NYPD Inspector General, an oversight division of the NYPD. La Salle notes,

"We are documenting so other people can see it. They only have a report of police on paper: this officer brutalized me; he harassed me; he used foul language. This is all that they get on paper. The videos give you a picture of Broken Windows policing beyond the facts."



The Copwatch Patrol Unit YouTube page aggregates all the police abuse the group has documented from the minor harassments against vendors to physical violence. Such aggregation has become increasingly used by media activist groups. The videos, according to LaSalle, are important because they "give you a picture of Broken Windows policing beyond the facts."



One of the many videos found on CPU's YouTube channel. "50 Pct - NYPD Cop Pummels Teen" has over 55,000 views. Within the video, we watch a bystander holding back the cop's arm by the bicep who intends to punch a tackled teen. The bystander loses their grip letting the cop punch the teen.

The aggregation of such videos challenges the belief that only a “few bad apples” ruin the integrity of NYPD. Instead, we witness the daily harassment by NYPD upon communities of color that set the conditions for such travesties like the murder of Eric Garner to take place. As Sasha Costanza-Chock has noted, quite a few movement activists have increasingly relied upon aggregation, curation, and amplification functions to propel their digital media activism.[82] For copwatchers like CPU, such aggregation has been a core tactic in revealing NYPD's standardized and consistent harassment of working-class communities of color.

Because of the effectiveness of CPU, LaSalle has been repeatedly surveilled by NYPD. In 2019 he won \$925,000 through two settlements with NYPD for false arrest, imprisonment, and conspiracy for his work as a copwatcher. He secretly taped officers incriminating themselves while celebrating his arrest.[84]

I witnessed such police intimidation firsthand when I interviewed LaSalle on a sweltering July afternoon in 2016 in a Starbucks in West Harlem just north of the iconic Apollo Theater. He wore an all-black outfit with white letters of CPU emblazoned across his baseball cap and the back of his t-shirt. He apologized for being slightly late as he lowered the static of the police scanner he had attached to his hip. As he did so, two police officers trailed in behind him, staring distinctly in our direction. Sensing their presence, LaSalle looked behind him to catch their sightline and turned back to me with a raised eyebrow. “See what I mean?” he commented as he shuffled in line to order a coffee. The cops eventually ordered their coffees and proceeded to leave the building all the while staring us down at the table I was interviewing him at.

Later that day reviewing my hour-long interview with LaSalle, an inexplicable high-pitched sound periodically pierces through the recording making it nearly inaudible. I had been using the same digital recorder for hundreds of other interviews in equally public and noisy spaces and have never encountered any similar issues. When I brought this up with another copwatch member, he noted matter-of-factly, “Oh, yeah, the police jammed your recording. What do you expect?”

These are just some of the daily issues that copwatchers have to contend with. A digital media arms race escalates between grassroots organizers and the forces of





Copwatch Patrol Unit teamed up with Black Entertainment Television in 2019 to produce the show *Copwatch America*. The show provided slick production values and wide distribution. But some of CPU's members felt that producers were trying to focus on intra-group fighting rather than on police abuse.



Jimmy Atchison was killed by Atlanta police officer Sung Kim. The picture shows his family rallying around his murder for police accountability. With the broadcast of *Copwatch America*, Atchinson's case gained traction eventually leading to Kim resigning from the police force. (Image from WTOL News)



Copwatch America ran for seven episodes before mysteriously being taken off the air for unknown reasons. Such a partnership reveals the difficulties any activist group has working with

the state that want to contain such organizing. Repeatedly during another phone interview with a Brooklyn copwatcher, I heard clicking noises over the line and the call itself dropped out an inordinate amount of times. Again, I was told by my interviewee, “That’s just NYPD.” The problem, of course, is that one cannot concretely document it is police interference, which is part of their goal that such surveillance leads to paranoia and the stifling of movement growth. But given the wealth of evidence of NYPD’s track record in infiltrating social movements, I consider it safe to assume I experienced some of this as well.[85]

CPU’s notoriety rose to such an extent that they were approached by various media outlets like MTV, VICE, and Black Entertainment Television to produce a reality television series. They eventually settled on working with BET to produce *Copwatch America* that documents the copwatching done by select groups in New York City and Atlanta. According to LaSalle, one of the show’s producers claimed the series would involve copwatchers across the United States. “But in reality,” LaSalle notes, “Copwatch Patrol Unit is the only group that really has a lot of evidence of the work they do.”[86]

The show aired in fall 2019. Initially, some CPU members held reservations about the show particularly in the way in which it highlighted in early episodes infighting between CPU and Black Lives Matter Greater New York. Kim Ortiz states,

“I had my concern, you know, about maybe it being a little bit too much like a reality show and maybe a little too much infighting and drama and not enough focusing on the work being done even though these little dramas and beefs, you know, are real.”[87]

As a result, Ortiz stopped feeding producers details about the infighting between groups, which forced the show to focus more on copwatching in its later episodes.

The show yielded some concrete results like the firing of Atlanta police officer Sung Kim who shot and killed unarmed, twenty-one year old Jimmy Atchison in January 2019.[88] According to news stories, Kim was given two options: resign or be terminated. The show provided valuable traction for needed media attention that the attorney for the Atchison family had been attempting to obtain ever since the killing.

Originally slated for ten episodes, all of which had been shot and edited, the show was suddenly pulled off the air by episode seven in December 2019. Episode eight was supposed to air on December 8th. But it was suddenly announced that the show would be going on hiatus for the holidays, which was not an uncommon move. Other BET shows like *Sisters* and *The Oval* also paused over the winter break. But when *Sisters* and *The Oval* announced their return dates while *Copwatch America* did not, CPU members became alarmed. Ortiz recounts,

“We were texting our people that we’ve been able to reach out to [from BET] and who’ve always been responsive up until this point who are now not responding to messages, not getting back to us. You know, sending us straight to voicemail.”

Similarly, Jose LaSalle recalls a producer from the show “gave us a thing about that his lawyer was looking into it, and he’ll get back to us and never got back to us.”

All the CPU members have is speculation and rumor that the show “pissed off political people” in Atlanta and New York City for its critical portrayals of the police. But neither Ortiz nor LaSalle could confirm this. Even worse, CPU signed a binding contract with BET to not allow any other network access to their material.

commercial media where most of the decisions are made by executives at distant locations often without the consultation of the groups participating with them. Twitter followers were disturbed to realize the show had been suddenly cancelled.



Some fans of *Copwatch America* created a petition in support of the show. The petition received little traction and made no impact. CPU members at the time of writing still have never received a response from BET as to why the show was cancelled. Cast members suspect the show's cancellation arose because of police pushback in Atlanta for the show getting an officer fired and/or complaints from representatives of the New York Police Department.

[89] So while the show is in limbo, CPU is stuck without a mainstream distribution outlet. [90]

CPU's experience with BET reveals the nebulous shared terrain between grassroots digital media activism and the interests of commercial media. CPU wanted to get its coverage out to a wider audience whereas BET wanted to capitalize upon the increasing popularity of copwatching. Although tensions existed from the beginning, CPU and BET established a delicate balance between both their interests for social justice and viewer ratings. But as the show produced concrete results and/or ruffled political feathers, BET quickly withdrew leaving CPU in a lurch. Kim Ortiz humorously reflects on the experience, "We went with Black Entertainment television thinking they were about BLACK ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION, our dumb asses."

Nonetheless, LaSalle ultimately imagines CPU creating its own YouTube series intertwined with livestreaming. He contemplates,

"We will document from the moment we start the livestream to the end. We will push it out there because people want to see that, people are very interested in seeing that." [91]

Whether or not this will become a reality remains to be seen since the Internet is littered with abandoned alternative media projects that sounded good in theory but revealed themselves as requiring more resources than initially anticipated. Furthermore, commercial platforms can remove content for any given reason. So reliance upon such unstable capitalist platforms seems deeply problematic for activists to create long term, sustained media projects.

But CPU, like many social movements that use digital media in their activism and community organizing, continue to copwatch in their local communities despite their troubles with BET. Most of these movements operate between the twin logics of connective and collective action, between virtual and physical spaces, between the hashtag and word-of-mouth. They might gain ground in one area while losing it in another. But for a complete accounting of how such digital media activism operates it behooves one to trace the invisible links that tether online actions back to the streets and amplify on-the-ground movements within virtual realms.

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Notes

1. For a series of recent reflections on Indymedia, see the special section, “Independent Media Centers 20 Years On,” edited by James F. Hamilton in *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 6 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0163443720926048> [[return to Introduction](#)]
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3. Naomi Klein, *Fences and Windows* (New York: Picador, 2002), 236.
4. John D.H. Downing, “Towards a Political Economy of Social Movement Media,” *Democratic Communiqué* 26, no. 1 (2013): 25.
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7. Andrew Marantz, “Mission Control,” *The New Yorker*, 24 October 2011: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/31/mission-control> (accessed 9/30/2020).
8. I place “social” in quotes since I do not consider an adequate term to name these commercial platforms that certainly have a social aspect, but the term carefully masks all their other central functions of surveilling users, exploiting their creativity, and data mining their information.
9. Michael Chanan, *Tales of a Video Blogger*, 37. [[return to Part I](#)]
10. I place “social” in quotes since I do not consider an adequate term to name these commercial platforms that certainly have a social aspect, but the term

carefully masks all their other central functions of surveilling users, exploiting their creativity, and data mining their information.

11. Chanan, 37.

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13. See Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2017) and David Harvey, *A Short History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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18. John Tarleton, "Paterson's Proposed CUNY Cuts Prompt Protests," *The Independent* 29 October, 2009: <https://indypendent.org/2009/10/patersons-proposed-cuny-cuts-prompt-protests/> (accessed 10/1/2020); Alan Duke, "California University Students Protest Tuition Hikes," *CNN* 18 November, 2009: <https://www.cnn.com/2009/US/11/18/california.tuition.protest/index.html> (accessed 10/1/2020); Markus Salzmann and Johannes Stern, "Student Protests in Austria," *World Socialist Web Site* 7 November 2009: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2009/11/aust-n07.html> (accessed 10/1/2020); Paul Lewis, Jeevan Vasagar, and Matthew Taylor, "Student Protests Over Fees Turns Violent," *The Guardian* 10 November 2010: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/nov/10/student-protest-fees-violent> (accessed 10/1/2020); Alan Taylor, "Student Protests in Chile," *The Atlantic* 10 August 2011: <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2011/08/student-protests-in-chile/100125/> (accessed 10/1/2020); Omayra Sosa-Pascual and Emma Graves Fitzsimmons, "Student Protests Tie Up Campuses in Puerto Rico," *The New York Times* 20 May 2010: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/21/us/21students.html> (accessed 10/1/2020); and Richard Seymour, "Quebec Students Provide a Lesson in Protest Politics," *The Guardian* 7 September 2012: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/sep/07/quebec-students-lesson-protest-politics> (accessed 10/1/2020).

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20. Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, "It's Time to Bust the Myth: Most Trump Voters Were Not Working Class," *The Washington Post* 5 June 2017: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/> (accessed 10/1/2020).

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22. Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 118-119.

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[[return to Part III](#)]

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65. I place "social" in quotes since I do not consider an adequate term to name these commercial platforms that certainly have a social aspect, but the term carefully masks all their other central functions of surveilling users, exploiting their creativity, and data mining their information.

66. Author interview with Ramla Bile, Kadra Abdi, and another anonymous member, April 10, 2019.

67. Author interview with Ayaan Dahir, March 23, 2018.

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69. Author interview with Burhan Israfael Isaaq, April 10, 2019.

70. Georgiades interview.

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77. I place "social" in quotes since I do not consider an adequate term to name these commercial platforms that certainly have a social aspect, but the term carefully masks all their other central functions of surveilling users, exploiting their creativity, and data mining their information. [[return to Part V](#)]

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<https://www.blacknews.com/news/atlanta-police-officer-resigns-after-premiere-police-brutality-docuseries-copwatch-america-air-bet/> (accessed 10/10/2020).

89. Ibid.

90. I made multiple attempts to contact BET executives but never received a response.

91. LaSalle interview 11 February 2020.

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Media in the COVID-19 pandemic: big and high, small and low

by [Dale Hudson](#) and [Patricia R. Zimmermann](#)



Street view. Someone has to work during Wuhan lockdown. Weixi Chen and Hao Wu, *76 Days*[United States/China, 2020]

Preamble

As Caren Kaplan and Patricia R. Zimmermann have pointed out, drone footage during the COVID-19 pandemic of lockdowns emerged as a new subgenre of media. It produced a distanced spectacle.

Aerial shots moving over new “ruins” of empty buildings are an elegy for global capital’s megacities, evoking militarized aerial mapping of the aftermaths of twentieth-century war. The new proliferation of drone videos operates as a series of hauntings, marshalling affect and romanticism, as dynamic nodes of global connectivity are immobilized into ghost towns. Drone videos during the lockdowns were shot by both amateurs and professionals. Ones produced by major news organizations, such as BBC, Channel News Asia, and *Washington Post*, camouflage people on the ground. They efface the crises of insufficient medical services and inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE), deaths beyond the capacity of morgues to house the bodies, and precarious multiple entwined networks of health, industry, media, public policy, and public health on the ground.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Broadcast on CTV and later published on the *New York Times* website, images of Wuhan, where SARS-CoV-2 which causes COVID-19 was first detected, are rendered by a remote-controlled drone to hide the frenetic activity inside the hospitals. It was not until almost a year after the initial infections that long-form



Optical illusion of an empty Wuhan from the drone’s perspective. Toronto: CTV News, 2020.



Drone video emphasizes the emptiness of bridge that connects Wuhan to the world. Toronto: CTV News, 2020.



Drones video emphasizes the emptiness of streets and sidewalks. Toronto: CTV News, 2020.



Stillness of streets echoes stillness of water that reflect buildings and evoke “a world turned upside-down.” Toronto: CTV News, 2020.

documentaries began to reevaluate what had taken place in December 2019 and January 2020 when the virus became a pandemic. These documentaries engage a kind of forensic analysis. Rather than merely represent the surface of the pandemic’s effects, as the drone videos do, they move down low to the level of the emergency rooms and intensive care units. They bring us the intense human suffering of patients, families, and medical professionals. They reset our memories from the nostalgia of pre-COVID-19 times evoked in drone videos over cities in lockdown to confront us with the ground-level realities of moments of the pandemic that we knew mostly through impersonal statistics.

These documentaries insist on naming and representing the fatigue and exasperation of medical professionals that emerged on blogs and news media during January 2020 when hospitals were overwhelmed. They demonstrate how state responses to the pandemic are complicated, and how information sometimes lingers between misinformation and disinformation. They show us how the pandemic was mediated as global—with viewers around the world lamenting over drone videos of empty streets—but its effects occurred locally. Drones allow us to see from a safe distance, offering the fantasy of seeing in totality—the “fiction of knowledge,” as Michel de Certeau observed in relation to the view of a city from a skyscraper.[2] To know the truth, it is often necessary to view the world down below at the level of the ground.

In retrospect, more than the aerial surveillance footage associated with twentieth-century bombardments, the drone videos are evocative of twenty-first-century drone warfare. Eyal Weizman describes how images can constitute a forensic examination of violence that happens at the “threshold of detectability.”[3] Under the Obama administration, the United States moved away from the “shock and awe” of twentieth-century warfare, notably the invasion of Iraq under the Bush II regime that was visually spectacular and mediated live on CNN, to the less detectable strategy of precision missiles, dropped by stealth drones, with micro-second delays on explosion in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Palestine (Gaza), Somalia, and Yemen. Rather than leveling buildings on impact, they pierced concrete and stone walls, and once inside, exploding to destroy human life while leaving the building intact. As Weizman explains,

“evidence was the distinct signature of drone strikes: small holes in the roof of otherwise intact building.”[4]

Technologies from twentieth-century aerial photography partner with twenty-first-century forms of warfare to document the logic of “smart” technologies: human “hostiles” and the “collateral damage” of bystanders, family members, and victims of inaccurate or careless military intelligence are murdered out of sight, while the human-built environment is preserved for reuse by the U.S. empire. As Weizman reminds us, we “need to study [drones] both as a material object and as a media representation” since aerial photography was often mobilized by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as evidence to deny that drone strikes had even happened since the buildings appeared undamaged.[5] The absence of visual evidence was itself an illusion. The evidence was visible, but it exists down low, below the threshold of visibility of aerial photographs taken up high.





Aerial views flatten the quarantine, so that everyone feels that they should have the same emotions. They are like statistics in the sense that they sometimes distort perceptions. U.S. rates of infection and death were high for a country with a relatively small and dispersed population. With more than 11 million inhabitants, Wuhan's population is larger than New York's, which is eight million. [6] To further put this into perspective, New York is the largest city in the United States. The second largest, Los Angeles, has fewer than half that number of people. China has 102 cities with over a million in population, compared only ten U.S. cities with this number. Wuhan's population is larger than London's nine million but smaller than Istanbul's and Moscow's, the largest European cities with 14.7 and 12.4 million inhabitants, respectively. The world's largest cities include Tokyo with 37.4 million, Delhi with 28.5 million, São Paulo and Mexico City, both with about 21.6 million, Cairo and Dhaka, both with about 20 million, and Osaka, 19 million. [7] Wuhan ranks ninth in terms of Chinese cities by population. Shanghai has 25.5 million inhabitants; Beijing, almost 20 million, Chongqing, Tianjin, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, all roughly between 12 and 16 million. What seems numerically big in the United States can seem small in China, but local suffering on the ground is almost the same.



Globalization at stasis as Wuhan Tianhe International Airport, typically the busiest airport in central China become immobile. Toronto: CTV News, 2020.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to study what lies below the thresholds of visibility to big media, as well as the material and immaterial effects of COVID on human and nonhuman bodies. We need to perform the forensics by reexamining media that emerged in the moment of curfews, lockdowns, and public-health recommendations that frequently changed day by day as new data became available. The pandemic's effects are not limited to the invasion of every organ in the human body, they also manifest in public-health protocols, such as lockdowns and social distancing.

In this article, we examine media during the COVID-19 pandemic—big and high, small and low—to understand the ways in which different dimensions of the pandemic can be communicated to others. This media helps us think about what is urgent and what is useful. While big media like CNN offered urgent information through its townhalls and reporting, it also provided information that was less useful. From its elevated placement, CNN's national and global statistics flattened the effects of the pandemic to infection and death rates. It did not publish recovery rates. Those can create a false sense of security that the virus is not



No arrivals or departures at airport terminal.
Toronto: CTV News, 2020.



Airplanes detached from jetways and parked on
tarmac at Wuhan Tianhe International Airport
Toronto: CTV News, 2020.

always fatal but can also suggest what we cannot yet know, namely long-term health problems due to COVID-19. Recovery is also an ambiguous term. It may indicate out of immediate danger of dying, and it may also mean no longer symptomatic.

Data visualizations by each of the fifty U.S. states reflect how each was forced to devise its own protocols in the absence of national ones. Data visualizations for the entire country, however, distort by blurring a vast array of “hot spots” and “safe zones” into a unified graphic form. By looking at them each day, viewers might mistake the spread as determined by contiguity, often reasserted in commentary about particular regions, rather than by other connections.

The virus did not merely spread from Seattle and New York City to surrounding areas in the Pacific Northwest (Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia in neighboring Canada) and the Tri-State Area (Connecticut, New Jersey, New York). Instead, it moved with human traffic since transmission and spread occurs from individual to individual, not geographical area to geographical area. The delayed rates of infection in rural areas points less to their geographical location than to their social disconnection to the traffic of global business.

The virus’s spread helps us visualize material connections over time. The drone image over Wuhan’s airport tell us that stopping virus’s spread also involves recognizing these connections by stopping globalized transportation infrastructure that connects different parts of the world. The solitary cars and vans that sometimes appear on otherwise emptied roads and bridges interrupt romanticized ideas of collective experience with the very different reality of people, who must continue to go work even during lockdown, so that our the lives of others can continue.

We do not altogether dismiss big media like CNN, especially in the United States where conspiracy theories spread on Facebook and Parler faster than the virus spreads from human to human. However, we want to shift focus to “small and low” media to discover details obscured by “big and high” media. The stories told in community or collaborative media projects remind us that the pandemic is global in its spread but its effects are highly uneven, not only in intensities, but in temporalities.

State responses were mixed with Brazil, Britain, India, Sweden, and United States as examples of ill-conceived and poorly executed responses, whereas Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Taiwan, and Viet Nam were praised as model responses. Dubbed “the world’s unlikeliest pandemic success story,” Bhutan was recently noted as an exceptional example of effective public-health policy with minimal resources.[8]

We have proposed a tentative model of “big and high” compared to “small and low,” though we reject the typical assumptions about “high” and “low.” We are not thinking of them in terms of culture or quality, but instead in terms of *altitude* and *distance*. We are not thinking about “big” and “small” in terms of importance or even reach, but in terms of *perspective* and *relevance*. Big and high concerns the broadcasts of media giants along with the spectacle of images from aerial drones, whereas small and low concerns narrowcast stories on community websites or chatgroups, along with videos shot imperfectly on mobile devices at ground level. These different forms and modes of “small and low” media help us understand how to make connections between the pandemic and other aspects of our lives. They reject the drone’s distance for the mobile’s proximity.

Local experts in Australia,

South Asia, and Southeast Asia

CNN's Coronavirus Town Halls mark a sharp contrast with short videos about the pandemic that are uploaded to EngageMedia's portal by communities in Australia, Indonesia, India, Nepal, and the Philippines. CNN is locked inside national and international frameworks; EngageMedia is open to stories, no matter how local. CNN organizes its Town Halls as two-hour specials; EngageMedia, makes short videos available to viewers whenever they choose to watch. CNN is corporate; EngageMedia, community-based. CNN is broadcast on premium cable; EngageMedia narrowcasts on free-to-use YouTube. They address different audiences with different priorities.



Audiences questions flash below big experts and journalist during CNN Coronavirus Town Hall (02 April 2020). Atlanta. CNN, 2020.

CNN's Coronavirus Town Halls are part of a larger international commercial media landscape that launched quick-response programming to a global state of emergency. They appeared belatedly, only after COVID-19 began to affect the United States. CNN's Town Halls were the most successful corporatized responses in terms of audience shares. By 27 January 2021, 25 town halls had aired. Hosted by anchor Anderson Cooper and medical correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta, CNN Town Halls consistently rank second in their primetime time slot. The format is simple: they are staged in the studio, robots film the hosts, and questions from viewers around the world flash continually on the bottom of the screen, anonymized under #cnntownhall.

The faces and voices of the people who ask questions are never shown or heard. Instead, viewers witness a cascade of simple and complex questions in flashing text that speak to anxieties and hysterias. According to Cooper, the sessions feature "experts, not politicians," especially guests from global public-health policy, public-health and medical experts, and celebrities like Bill Gates, Alicia

Keys, and Spike Lee. Unlike CNN in general, the Town Halls assiduously avoid contentious U.S. political debates about the virus. Cooper explains that they try “to stay away from the political side of this, because we do want to get many people to watch to get informed.” [9] Town halls excise politics from public health only in the sense that face-masks and social distancing have been politicized in the United States and in other countries where rightwing populism terrorizes political life.

CNN Town Halls relegate viewers faceless, voiceless, and placeless position at the lower screen where questions flash almost too fast to be read. In contrast, a series of short community-produced videos uploaded to EngageMedia, invert “big and high” to “small and low.” This strategy insists that people’s faces, voices, and places have agency during the pandemic. Robots do not film big experts on sound stages. Instead, humans produce videos with low-end video gear and mobile phones. While they are modest in production, these videos are urgent and useful. They move down to the ground, featuring groups of local experts and others who retain their agency amidst the pandemic.

Rather than extracting it from a world largely defined by global capitalism, positioning it as an unprecedented, once in a century, unique, separate, isolated, and singular experience, these videos insist upon threading other issues and politics into the pandemic crisis. Rather than big media, these videos are small media of great urgency. They emphasize their use value and feature many voices and many groups in a polyphony of intertwined perspectives. EngageMedia aggregates these community-produced videos, connecting them to videos from other crises, such as the Avian Influenza outbreak in Indonesia in 2009 and to informational videos produced by UNICEF and other nongovernmental agencies. EngageMedia situates the COVID-19 pandemic in a history of pandemics, epidemics, and outbreaks that all trace their origins to human abuses of the planet.

The Maritime Union of Australia produced three four-to-eight-minute videos entitled “The Year That Was 2020,” each featuring a different union activist.

In “Paul McAleer, The Year That Was 2020” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QromB6ilZKE>, uploaded on 25 December 2020) Sydney branch secretary of the maritime union Paul McAleer opens by addressing viewers as “comrades,” using direct address in a medium close-up. The video interconnections between the pandemic, the bush fires, changes to labor policy by the federal government, struggles for Aboriginal justice, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the United States.

McAleer calls attention to how “Australian seafarers have helped thousands of people get through this terrifying time,” by delivering seventeen imperial tons (15.4 metric tons) of water to those impacted by the bush fires and explains how members of the federal government “came out and exercised their ruling class power” to ram through work-place job changes, such as “insuring [that] jobs are casualized” (meaning workers are not hired full-time but are hired when needed.). The images accompanying his testimony are derived from Australian and U.S. commercial media programs on COVID-19, generating a dialectic between the union’s voice and work with commercial media’s representations of state power.

Images from *Paul McAleer, The Year That Was 2020*. Sydney: The Maritime Union of Australia, 2020.



Paul McAleer addresses audience as comrades.



Bushfires devastate 186,000 square kilometers.



Austrians queue as government struggles with COVID-19 crisis.



Linesmen at Ausport protest.



BLM intersects with Aboriginal Rights.



Scott Morrison government changes work law during pandemic.

Images from *Rural Women Speak Out* [PAN Asia Pacific, 2020]



Tanquilina Alibango explains environmentalism as women's rights.

Descended from white settlers, McAleer connects Aboriginal rights in Australia to BLM in the U.S. settler colony. Invoking the Uluru Statement developed at the First Nations National Constitutional Convention in 2017, he aspires to “destroy discrimination, destroy oppression, destroy injustice.” He concludes by thanking the seafarers for all their work during the pandemic, then looking straight at the camera, he asserts that we must “build solidarity with other workers.”

“Rural Women Speak Out” (<https://video.engagemedia.org/view?m=PNvrmqe03>) is a video about COVID-19 presented by EngageMedia. It is four minutes in length and went live on 15 October 2020 as part of the 16 Days of Global Action on Agroecology: Fight for Food System Change, which was launched by PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP), an activist organization. The description of the video notes that “the pandemic disproportionately affects rural women” with increased work amid lack of government support, and that agroecology helps to “alleviate the burden they are carrying.” The video is organized in a problem-and-solution structure, with individual women from India, Nepal, the Philippines, and Viet Nam, recounting challenges that the pandemic has saddled upon them.



Sherada Paswan discusses the advantages of organic seeds.



Pham Thi Huyen explains advantages of natural substitutes for dangerous chemicals.

Looking directly at the camera and framed in medium shots, they mention



Angelita Manangan explains converting to organic farming.



Dr. Indira Devi P.

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children's schooling, lost income from the inability to sell herbs at the market, and healthcare issues. The second half of the video explains the need for agroecology to convert to organic local farming. Angelita Manangan from the Philippines explains how she converted to organic farming to help cope with the pandemic. Sherada Paswan from Nepal explains that it is difficult to buy seeds during the pandemic and easier to use locally sourced bottle-gourd and okra seeds. Venda from India tells women farmers to use natural compost instead of pesticides to avoid health problems. Pham Thi Huyen from Viet Nam uses chili-garlic spray instead of chemical pesticides to help protect her health. Dr. Indira Devi P. from Kerala Agricultural University argues that the urgency of sustainable development goals is *underlined* during the pandemic. She contends that "your health depends on the food that you eat, the air that you breathe, and the water that you drink... you have to follow safe farming practices."

Most of these women are shot outside, in their gardens or on their farms. The video features multiple voices of woman from different countries in South and Southeast Asia, united in advocacy for agroecology. The perspectives of these local experts are contextualized by on-location shooting with modest equipment, rather than placing journalists and big experts (and celebrities) in isolation with robots on a sound stage. These "small and low" videos make an argument that COVID-19 cannot be separated from food production outside the control of transnational corporations. Organic farming is not reduced to a label at a whole food shop; it becomes a politics of resistance against the very forces of global capitalism that generated the perfect conditions for the pandemic.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *Now is the Time (Ngayon Ang Panahon)* [Manilla: Friends of Altrernatrip, 2020]



Singing "Your time is now" and expressing the urgency of activism.



Imagining the dire consequences of doing nothing—"Or else it's all for none."



Speaking up for political prisoners.

EngageMedia's COVID-19-related videos expand into genres and modes beyond advocacy and organizing videos.



Opposing violence against civilians .

"Now is the Time (Ngayon Ang Panahon)" (<https://video.engagemedia.org/view?m=OKrAusoOX>) is a collaboratively produced song in Tagalog protesting against the Philippines Anti-Terrorism Law. That law demonizes dissent and infringes on privacy, paving the way for the government to attack its critics, enacted by President Rodrigo Duterte in early July 2020 when citizens contended with the pandemic. Uploaded on 06 August 2020, the video features 33 guitarists, synths, string players, drummers, percussionists, bass players, and singers, who perform the song from their homes. They come from indie alt-rock bands, such as Beast Jesus, Eggboy, The General Strike, Identikat, Oh Flamingo, We Are Imaginary, among others. The video shows four to six performers at a time, rejecting the idea of a singular star. The description of the video on the EngageMedia portal, written by the producers, contends it is "an anthem against the rise of tyranny and the intensifying fascism in the Philippines amidst the COVID-19 pandemic" and the Anti-Terrorism Law.

Produced by Ean Aguila, Jam Lorenzo, and RJ Mabilin, the video opens with a quote from independent filmmaker Lino Brocka from his "Artist as Citizen." He says:

"The artist is a committed person, who will always take the side of any human being who is violated, abused, oppressed, dehumanized, whatever his instrument."

In the video, different vocalists sing the words both alone and together, with no one performer highlighted. The verses proclaim:

"You've been looking for a reason, a reason to rise, you time is now... Hold back your tears. Are you here? Hold your head up high. We still have time to spare. Your time is now. The time to fight."

The chorus repeats throughout the song "What are we waiting for, Bodies slowly piling up the floor."



Chorus of "Scream your heart out, don't stop."

Throughout the video, performers hold up hand drawn signs on cardboard, paper, spiral notebooks, mobile phones, iPads, scraps of paper with sayings such as "Activism Is Not Terrorism," "Artists Fight Back," "Defend Press Freedom," "Dissent Is Democracy," "Junk Terror Law," "Mass Testing Now," "Out Duterte Now," "Resist," and various hashtags such as #activismisnotterrorism, #defendpressfreedom, #freecabuyad11, and #Junkterrorlaw. In his review of "Now is the Time," Ian Urrutia advances that

"with the entire nation on the brink of societal collapse, there's a need to foster more critical voices and take a stand against the state's exploitation of the public health crisis to advance its interests." [10]
[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)



Activism is not terrorism.

These three community-produced videos uploaded to EngageMedia counter the spectacle of CNN Town Halls' excision of people's faces, voices, and places, as well as their inscription of big media's high production values, institutional setting, and celebrities. Instead, these videos exemplify the power and purpose of the "small and low."

They are produced on the ground and situated in specific local contexts with larger webs of conflictual politics and global interconnections. They also instantiate how "small and low" pandemic media can operate in a myriad of forms and modes, from a union call to action for intersectional politics and solidarities against a government that is changing laws whilst its citizens struggles with effects of climate crisis and the pandemic, to an ecologically driven political movement advocating for problem-solving that connects COVID-19 to sustainable agriculture, to indie alt-rock musicians joining together to fight against state abuses of power that leverage the pandemic to enact repressive laws. All of these videos move away from programs where journalists field questions to big experts on branded sound stages equipped for celebrity performances, to focus instead on local experts, who are firmly situated in places, politics, and struggles.

Women's perspectives throughout Africa

Isolated by quarantines and lockdowns, many people turned to film and television as a make-do substitute for social interaction. Hollywood attempted to respond to how the pandemic reconfigured our lives, but it often missed what was most important to people outside the entertainment industry. *Locked Down* (United States, 2021; dir. Doug Liman), for example, offers what critic Benjamin Lee calls "many, many misfiring attempts at comedy (isn't Zoom annoying lol etc.]" [11]

Other Hollywood media was more modest. Netflix's *Homemade* invited stars of

international cinema to make short films with whatever cameras were available under the protocols for film shoots in their location. With a few notable exceptions, the results were little more than media elites fumbling within the bubbles of their own privilege. Rachel Morrison's *The Lucky Ones* (United States, 2020), as an example, is a self-indulgent lament about being denied the privilege of giving her children what she defines as a "normal" childhood. Her film retreats from reality into comforting nostalgia, as her family enjoys the safety of a private beach house. Her film evokes the melancholia of the Wuhan drone videos. Other episodes of *Homemade* actually employ professional drones, suggesting that acculturation to access to the "big and high" might be difficult to shake.

Images from *Face Mask for Sale*. Neha Manoj Shah [Kenya, 2020]



Looking outside during lockdown.



Sketching as self-reflection.



Removing glasses since "stuck at home" does not mean that women get to choose how to "use this time wisely" like men.

In contrast, Ladima Foundation's *African Women in the Time of COVID* (2020) is a collection of ten short films, made by women across the Continent on their experiences during the pandemic.[12] It resulted from a competition in partnership with DW Akademie, which received nearly 200 submissions in June 2020. Ladima creates platforms for women to convey perspectives that VOD corporations like Netflix might overlook. In fact, the Pan-African not-for-profit supports, trains, and mentors women in creative industries.

The short films reflect upon the cumulative effects of tiny, incremental, everyday changes to women's lives that can erupt in dangers other than infection. They delve deeply into issues entangled with the virus but often missed by "big and high" media. For their short two-minute duration, the films focus on the resilience of African women under pressures unimaginable to Larrain's buddies. "African women face significant social, economic and political vulnerabilities," an opening intertitle explains:

"These issues became critical during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, and female creatives across Africa documented these dangers African women face with maternal childcare, domestic violence, rape and the loss of livelihoods. These selected films provide us with a window into the soul of Africa, a call to all that Africa can only succeed when women thrive."

Neha Manoj Shah's *Face Mask for Sale* (Kenya, 2020) opens with chatter inside the head of a young mother. "They say," she recounts of well-intended social pressures that are now ingrained into her sense of self, "to use this time to learn a new skill. Learn a new language maybe. Try reading that book." In close-up, a young woman looks out a window. Later shots pan across her bookshelf, as the voiceover continues to list what everyone is being invited to do now that they no longer have to commute to work or school: "Improve yourself. You're stuck at home, right? So, use this time to get your life right." An image of a brilliant orange and yellow flower, coated in morning dew, holds on screen, a reminder of what we might no longer have time or opportunity to notice.

"They say that this is the new normal," continues the voiceover. "To work from home. To exercise at home." The young woman's hand sketches an eye, then she places a pair of glasses atop a sketchbook. "You're stuck at home right, use this time wisely," the voiceover interrupts; "They say that it is possible for one to live their entire life within these four walls without their mental health crumbling and falling." A medium longshot shows the woman removing a shirt to reveal her pregnant belly. "Through in retrospect," she says in voiceover, "I really don't think they were talking to women."

Face Mask for Sale frames well-indented perspectives that privilege men. The voiceover returns with a new urgency:

"My children and I are stuck at home. They don't understand, and now I must be everything on my own. I cook, I clean, I teach, I play. It was



Wearing mask for children when it was fun and games at first.



"Following government directives. Just like every woman."

all fun and games at first, but now I wonder who will earn when I am stuck at home being a full-time mom."

After a pause, she says: "I'm scared." She explains that her children are bored and confused and that she too has her own "emotions to sort out." She rubs the drawing to revise the sketch of how she sees herself. She is consumed by self-doubts:

"Am I good enough? And when I step outside do I look like a perfect mother? I'm so tired of pretending like I am not going under when all I am doing is following government directives. Just like every woman, I have a mask on."

The final shot closes in on a charcoal sketch of a woman with eyes closed and a medical mask over her mouth and nose. The film evokes more than the facemasks, which are not the only masks that young women have been asked by governments to wear. They are also asked to assume a doubt-free presentation of self, a figurative mask that conceals their concerns as if they honestly believe everything will be okay. *Face Mask for Sale* raises questions about what staying at home means for single mothers—relentless stress over how to provide for their children. The film invites empathy with those who are more vulnerable, rather than Morrison's nostalgia for the storybook childhood available only to the privileged.

Like *Face Mask for Sale*, the next film, Wambui Gathee's *Love, Zawadi* (Kenya, 2020), opens in voiceover: "If you are reading this, it is already too late." A young woman is in bed reading with her stuffed animals around her, while one hand holds a noose. Both her arms are bandaged and bloodied, and we see razor blades and pills nearby. The walls and curtain behind her are illuminated in blue and red light. A man interrupts her reading in bed. "It is not your fault," she says; "It is I who couldn't stop him." During the lockdown, everyone is fighting "monsters of their own." She tried "turning it off, my monster," and then decided to "turn it up." Her experience of lockdown is defined by objects like razor blades, pills, bandages, and rope. His experience is defined by a glass of whisky, a joint, and a hookah pipe emblazoned with the Playboy logo—all bathed in rose-colored light. He assaults her. "Pain, more pain... again and again," she explains.

Images from *Love, Zawadi*, Wambui Gathee [Kenya, 2020]



"If you are reading this, it is already too late."



Playboy experience of lockdown is not the same as hers.



Untold stories, terrifying statistics.

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Images of being assaulted layer atop one another, as she is raped again and again. She explains how each violation feels like having one's hope, dignity, and soul leave one's body. The film ends with the haunting statement: "This is my choice. Love, Zawadi." She has wrapped a noose around her neck and left a suicide note. The final image shows a page from a newspaper called *The Untold*, dated 20 June 2020. It features a story titled "COVID Outside, Petrified Inside: The Rock and the Hard Place that Women and Young Girls Are Left to Choose from." The story reveals that since the lockdown in Kenya, there has been a 38% increase in assault and gender-based violence with estimates that these figures represent only half of the actual cases. The final image shows the young woman, staring blankly with the noose in the foreground.

Images from *Moyo*. Hellen Samina Ochieng [Kenya, 2020].



Finding notice of rent due.

Hellen Samina Ochieng's *Moyo* (Kenya, 2020) offers a harrowing tale of a young girl being taken to hospital, not for COVID-19, but because she has been raped. The opening image shows her perspective, the camera adopting the point of view of her eyes behind bandages. The nurse expresses shock over her condition. The film then tells her story in flashback. Her mother returned home at 5:29 PM, lifting a "rent due" notice on her door. She sanitized her hands and removed her mask before hugging her daughter. Later, her mother receives an emergency call in the middle of the night, and because she must leave, she asks a male neighbor to watch her daughter. He rapes her instead. By 6:15 AM, a little more than twelve hours after the story began, she is taken to the hospital. The film ends with an intertitle revealing "a dramatic increase in cases of rape, defilement, domestic violence, and intimate partner violence" in Kenya since the lockdown, with a girl raped "every 30 minutes."

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| Following the safety protocols. | His response to watching her. |
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| Her response to being watched by him. | Her perspective on entering hospital during pandemic, but not with COVID-19. |

In comparison, Faith Ilevbare's *Loop: Every End Has a Beginning* (Nigeria, 2020) tells the story of a young boy, who witnessed his mother being abused by his father—and the frightening statistic that when young boys observe such violence, it typically manifests in violent behavior against their own partners later in life. The film's structure is simple and effective at conveying domestic violence's multigenerational consequences. The scene is shown first from inside the bedroom, then it is rewound and shown from the young boy's perspective outside. Another film that addresses domestic violence is Aurelie Stratton's *I'll Call You Later* (South Africa, 2020) unfolds as a simple conversation with a middle-class woman who tries to convince her friend that she merely "took a fall" after her friend notices bruises on her torso. As the woman struggles to convince her friend of this lie, she hears her husband return, so she tries to end the video chat. Her friend continues talking, so the chat remains connected. Her friend hears the woman's screams as her husband beats her, but there is nothing that she can do in that moment to help.



Revealing sign of domestic abuse in *I'll Call You Later*. Aurelie Stratton [South Africa, 2020].

Chioma Divine Favour Mathias's *My Sunshine* (Nigeria, 2020) focuses on a young mother, navigating her responsibility to raise her blind daughter, which worsened when the father reappeared in her life. The mother struggles with money, for instance, she must choose between sanitary pads and food, but she is confident that she will find a way. Yehoda Hammond's *Worlds Apart* (Ghana, 2020) offers two views into life during the pandemic. A middle-class girl transitions to remote learning online, whereas a working-class girl must forego her education and work with her parents at an open-air market. Both miss school, but different financial circumstances mean that one continues her education, whereas the other does not.

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Financially secure and insecure experiences of remote learning during pandemic. *Worlds Apart*, Yehoda Hammond [Ghana, 2020].

The sequencing of films in the collection has the cumulative effect of showing how the welfare of women and children are not always addressed by top-down state policies on mask wearing, hand washing, and social distancing. The films alert us to what is happening every day in cities around Africa and elsewhere—events that do not appear in the drone footage, infection graphics, and death statistics of big media, nor do they occur to many media élites. Instead, these films mobilize filmmaking to make these entwined issues legible, visceral, and recognized as urgent.

Other films in *African Women in the Time of COVID* are more light-hearted. Fezeka Shandu's *Blunder* (South Africa, 2020) questions whether “the ancestors” can intervene in *lobalo* (bride price) negotiations between two families via video-conferencing during the pandemic, suggesting that even tradition can be a path to rethinking patriarchy. Malek El Araby's *Being* (Egypt, 2020) reevaluates friendship and everyday pleasures taken for granted. Finally, Skinnor Davillah Agfello's *The Tempest* (Kenya, 2020) returns to the premise of the first film. A young mother attempts to “stay positive” in spite of mounting responsibilities to self, family, and the world. Less time at work and on social media can be okay, she reasons, since “being a hero has never been easier.” It is also different in acknowledging that we need to change our collective behavior, especially those with financial privilege.



“Being a hero has never been easier” for privileged women. *The Tempest*. Skinnor Davillah Agfello [Kenya, 2020].

Taken together, the films show a range of experience in the modality of “small and low.” They are urgent and useful, so they use any technologies available. Gathe recorded the voiceover for *Love, Zawadi* on a mobile phone, since access to a sound studio was impossible.[13] The Ladima Foundation demonstrates how sometimes “big and high” media can leave no room to breathe when people are literally suffocating due to a virus that prevents the human body from absorbing oxygen.

Many of the episodes of the Netflix's *Homemade* are not so “big and high.” Shot almost entirely from GoPro camera attached to a drone, Ana Lily Amirpour's *Ride It Out* (United States, 2020) follows Amirpour riding a bicycle through an empty downtown Los Angeles, captured by cinematographer Pawel Pogorzelski in collaboration with drone operator Armen Aghaeian. The narration by Cate Blanchett mused about being outside during lockdown, and the footage was edited by Taylor Levy into a story. Blanchett's pseudo-philosophical voiceover has been compared (without irony) to Werner Herzog's dramatic self-importance on his own films as Amirpour gets lost in the “big and high” as she peddles through some of the most expensive real estate in southern California.[14]



Illusions of simplicity as director peddles a bicycle under a GoPro camera and drone, while Hollywood celebrity reads her ultra-privileged musings in voiceover. *Ride It Out*. Ana Lily Amirpour [United States, 2020].

The Guardian's Peter Bradshaw described *Homemade* as a “diverting but indulgent collection.” [15] Its privilege notwithstanding, *Homemade* does offer moments when voices outside Hollywood can be heard. Ladj Ly also uses a drone over an empty Paris suburb in *Clichy-Montfermeil* [France, 2020], though he explores more urgent questions about the future of “art” in Hollywood. Flying over one of the most affected parts of Paris, the drone shows families atop buildings, then looks inside a building to reveal a scene of domestic abuse. Lys pulls into focus how income and resources affect the experiences of lockdown. He hijacks the distanced view of “big and high” then moves back to “small and low” where the virus is entwined with other injustices.

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Reimagining musical performance with social distancing in Britain and United States

In times of mourning, crisis, trauma, and loss, music is a way to bring people together in a single place, providing a shared space for experiencing unresolved emotions beyond words. It sustains a space to move past the self into the realm of the collective, the transitory, ineffable, and sublime.

Music moves beyond the quotidian predictability of daily life into ritual's slower, more layered temporality. The pandemic is a crisis with massive loss and death, and social distancing means that music cannot be experienced in shared spaces. Amusing innovations have developed, such as The Flaming Lips performing to a crowd of people, each of whom is safely contained inside a plastic bubble. Oxygen inside the bubbles lasts only about an hour.[16] [[open endotes in new window](#)]



The Flaming Lips concert in individual bubbles, 2021.

As a result of the pandemic, musicians have reconceived performance, moving it from the big spaces of concert halls to the small spaces of homes, for performer and audience alike, on small screens and over small speakers.



Andrea Bocelli, *Music for Hope Concert* inside cathedral. [Forte dei Marmi: Andrea Bocelli, 2020]

Italian operatic tenor Andrea Bocelli emerged as a de-facto pandemic superstar of classical European music. His “Music for Hope: Live from Il Duomo di Milano” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huTUOek4LgU>) Easter Sunday concert on 12 April 2020, exemplifies how “big and high” melded together, not as spectacle, but into contemplation. Bocelli performed alone in the cathedral as drones moved through the empty space. He sang a series of religious songs such as “Ave Maria,” “Domine Deus,” and “Sancta Maria,” while drone videos over Beijing, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Florence, London, New York, Paris, São Paulo, Venice, Warsaw, and other cities under lockdown were intercut, suggesting the grandeur of one person speaking for the entire globe. Three million viewers logged on for the livestream, and another thirty-two million accessed it on YouTube within twenty-four hours.[17] The performance instantiated individual longing, loss, disconnection, emptiness in large spaces, and supplication to a higher power.



Andrea Bocelli, *Music for Hope Concert* drone shot. [Forte dei Marmi: Andrea Bocelli, 2020]



Andrea Bocelli, *Music for Hope Concert*, last scene outside cathedral singing “Amazing Grace.” [Forte dei Marmi: Andrea Bocelli, 2020]

For Christmas 2020, Bocelli continued this same aesthetic and political strategy with an online concert entitled “Believe in Christmas.” Staged by Franco Dragone from Cirque du Soleil, it was livestreamed and billed as a “one-off live event” available for U.S.\$25 on Ticketmaster, a contrast to the viral group music videos that circulate on social media networks by less renowned musicians.

As a teaser for this concert, Bocelli staged a rendition of Leonard Cohen’s song “Hallelujah” with his daughter in the Teatro Regio di Parma in Assisi. They performed on a large stage in an empty theater with a full orchestra in the pit below them. They sat on the stage illuminated by LED lights in lanterns. The dark emptiness of the theater contrasted with the lighting of the father and daughter as they sang a duet, partly in Italian, partly in English. Drone shots were intercut with a two shot of father and daughter, emphasizing familialism. The camera moved around them in a languorous tracking shot that contrasted with the drone shots of the theater space. Like the first concert, the affect is loss, emptiness, mourning, isolation, and of course, celebrity and paternalism.



Andrea Bocelli and eight-year old daughter Virginia Bocelli, singing “Hallelujah” at Il Teatro Regio di Parma. [Forte dei Marmi: Andrea Bocelli, 2020]



Reverse shot of concert hall where Andrea Bocelli and eight-year old daughter Virginia Bocelli sing “Hallelujah” at Il Teatro Regio di Parma. [Forte dei Marmi: Andrea Bocelli, 2020]

In contrast, Scottish pop singer Annie Lennox, of the Eurythmics, produced a rendition of “Dido’s Lament,” the final aria from Henry Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), to support Greenpeace in November 2020. The aria is also known as “When I Am Laid in Earth” and is a melancholy part of the operatic tragedy, evoking in this instance the entwined collective losses of global climate disruption and the pandemic.

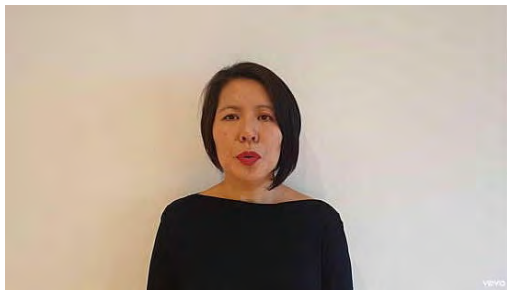
Lennox for benefit of Greenpeace, 2020]



Annie Lennox and the London City Voices in group shot, performing "Dido's Lament."



Annie Lennox and the London City Voices in different visual design, performing "Dido's Lament."



Annie Lennox and the London City Voices with individual close-ups, performing "Dido's Lament."

The aria is almost always sung as a solo, with videos abounding of well-known sopranos such as Fiona Campbell, Joyce Di Donato, and Jessye Norman, singing the baroque aria, delivered by Dido, Queen of Carthage, who is dying of a broken heart on learning her fiancé Aeneas, a hero of the Trojan war, plans to abandon her. The lyrics elaborate death and finality:

"When I am laid, am laid in earth/May my wrongs create no trouble,
no trouble in thy breast/Remember me, Remember me but ah forget
my fate/Remember me, but ah, Forget my fate."

Lennox inverts this norm, taking an aria for one person and transforming it into a choral piece, and then translating classical opera's high art into a pop-music vocal style. She collaborated with the non-audition community London City Voices Choir. Wearing concert-black clothing against home-made white backgrounds, 276 members participated, singing "Dido's Lament" from their homes with Lennox performing the minimalist piano accompaniment herself. Although generally accompanied by full orchestra, here, the aria emphasizes the amateur, accessible, and small.

The video places Lennox in the middle of the screen, surrounded by the square images of the choir in a large group shot and later in individual portraits. Rather than the deeply nuanced and highly trained voices of classical opera singers, Lennox and the choir combine pop-music and amateur styles. The aria takes the lament for a lost lover and translates it into a much larger and less romantic lament for those lost to COVID-19—and for the dying planet. The concert black that the performers wear is also the black of mourning; the singers' white backgrounds suggest clouds, or perhaps apocalypse.



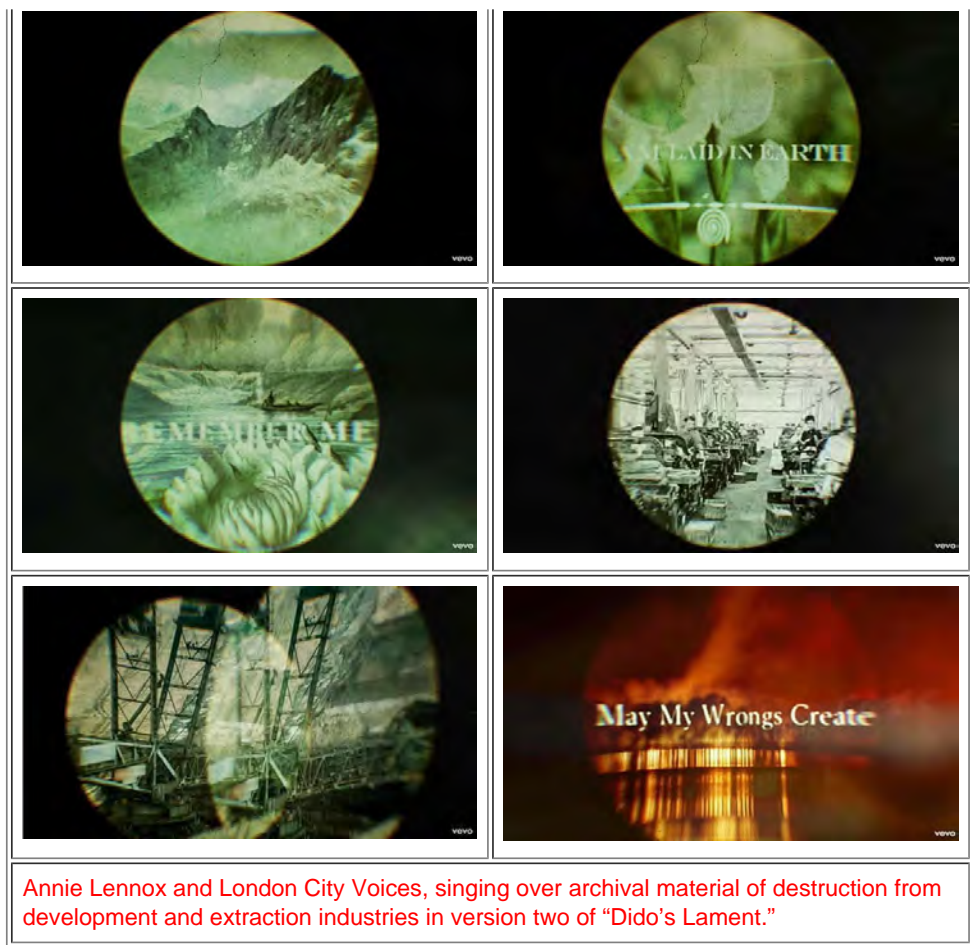
Annie Lennox and the London City Voices in large group shot at the conclusion of "Dido's Lament."

As choral director and music scholar Janet Galvan has noted, "Dido's Lament" is considered one of the saddest melodies in the western opera repertoire, as it is a farewell to the world. The melody constitutes a form of sighing, with the notes descending on the scale. Baroque vocal music is noted for its cleanliness and purity of sound, without vocal excess or ornamentation and space between the musical notes, in contrast to opera like that of Verdi, with a wider range of vibrato and more vocal ornamentation.

Galvan identifies baroque vocal music as "clean, mean, lean," attributes that Lennox translates in a more democratic way through her style and use of the choir. According to Galvan, baroque vocal music is not loud and bombastic; rather, it has a softer, cleaner, and clearer tone.[18] Lennox resolutely does not imitate operatic style, but instead renders it into pop music, creating a sense of the aria as malleable to the different kinds of trained and untrained voices and adaptable to the technological and social/political context. Lennox has reimagined the solo as a chorale collective piece, which suggests solidarity and activism rather than the isolation of melancholy.

Lennox produced two videos for "Dido's Lament," one with the choir in Zoom squares (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3DFaIovZxc>), and one with archival footage of the larger climate crisis in a circle on the screen (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yWda4RJ0OI>) [The archival version moves from animals and landscapes to human-built environments and extraction of natural resources. It is a history of the destruction of living habitats. In this version, there is a circular shape in the middle of the black screen that suggests the earth and evokes early cinema's masking of the rectangular frame. The images migrate from mountains, waterfalls, rivers, into cities, factories, streets, buildings, oil wells, coal mines, airplanes, appliances, streets, roads, highways, birds, tigers, and turtles. It ends with images of wild fires, plastic bags in the water, garbage on a beach, clouds, and then the earth. Single phrases from the lament are laced throughout as text, such as "May my wrongs create," "when I am laid," "Remember me," "forget my fate," always in superimposition on the archival images.





The images are presented in a continual fluctuation of different colors from pink to blue to green. This video chronicles a history of the Anthropocene's destruction, emphasizing that "remember me" in the lament refers to the Earth, nonhuman animals, nature, and landscapes before capitalist destruction. Both videos enact the modalities of "small," taking big issues like tragedy in operatic arias and the end of the earth and rendering them scalable. Both videos marshal tactics of "low" as well, bringing the high culture of opera to a more democratic, untrained, collective enterprise where the act of singing matters more than judgements about its execution. Finally, it brings the high tragedy derived from Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid* on which the opera is based, down to the earth and voices of the amateur choir.

Ithaca College's "Amazing Grace" video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wuC6FLyJ8>) features over 300 students in the School of Music, singing and playing. It aligns with Lennox's "Dido's Lament" videos as a collaborative project that confronts the politics and emotions of isolation during the pandemic, especially poignant, since musicians depend on being in close proximity to each other when they play to hear and experience more deeply. The video has garnered nearly 20,000 views in less than a month, circulating in social media. Like "Dido's Lament," it operates as an inversion of "big and high" modalities into "small and low" ones. Taking the U.S. folk song "Amazing Grace," the video stages a socially distanced performance that inserts more voices and instrumentation. It is in stark contrast with Andrea Bocelli's Easter concert with its drones flying over head the tenor's head as he sings in front of an empty cathedral.

In the Ithaca College video, hundreds of students sing and play together in Zoom. They take something that is small and make it big in small ways. Each person sings or plays at home. They are not uniformly dressed, as in the Lennox-Greenpeace video; instead, they wear a panoply of styles, from concert-black

Images from Student online performance of "Amazing Grace." [Ithaca: Ithaca College School of Music, 2020]

This performance is dedicated to the memory of those who have lost their lives in the pandemic, as well as to their loved ones and to the healthcare professionals and other essential, frontline workers who continue to take risks to serve others in their communities.

Opening dedication to frontline COVID-19 workers in student online performance of "Amazing Grace."

formal wear, to plaid shirts, and from Ithaca College sweatshirts to nice blouses as they sing and play their instruments, each in their own square. The style of the video with each student playing or singing inside an individual square on the screen offers multiple visualizations of the students, most of whom are framed in medium close-up. They are not identical—different, yet all grounded in their homes, literally and figuratively. They do not perform in one of the campus's big concert halls with perfect acoustics, but in small bedrooms and dining rooms in their homes with low-tech recording equipment against all sort of ambient noise that their audience might or might not hear.

As Ithaca College decided to make the fall 2020 semester fully remote, Aaron Witek, an assistant professor of trumpet and a professional performer, felt it was important to generate positive news about the college and, even more urgently, to create performance experiences and a sense of community among students in the School of Music.

With a miniscule budget, he chose "Amazing Grace" because it is in the public domain. Witek used his limited funds to commission an alumnus to arrange the piece for a large ensemble. He wanted the music to be identifiable to anyone who heard it. He felt that the song reflected the pandemic and decided to dedicate the performance to COVID-19 victims and frontline workers in remembrance and support. Serving as artistic director and producer, Witek storyboarded the song and provided shooting directions to student performers, alerting them to pay attention to backgrounds and to shoot in landscape, rather than portrait format, whether from their phones or better digital cameras. [19]



Sean Lindfors, assistant professor of music education at Ithaca College and a specialist in choral music education, was brought in as conductor. In another inversion for the virtual performance, the conductor is invisible to the audience. Lindfors pointed out that the project was designed "to just have a moment together" during the pandemic that evokes the strong feeling of togetherness when musicians perform in a shared space. Lindfors is fascinated with how the pandemic pushes artists to innovate—and audiences to reimagine their responses to art.

Connecting to pandemic experience, Lindfors points out that John Newton, the song's lyricist, wrote about lost family members, of loneliness, separation, anxiety, and loss that are often not spoken or discussed. During production, Lindfors and Witek stressed the importance of doing something collaborative, together as a large group of students in a music school, with vocalists and instrumentalists. Students were not required to participate, but most did.



Students collaborate in online performance of “Amazing Grace.”

Lindfors underscores how the pandemic requires reorienting music pedagogy, where *listening* becomes more important than being in embodied settings. Texture, dynamics, interpretation, and phrasing is also much more difficult remotely, requiring a move to very small breakdowns, not only of the phrases in the music, but also the process.[20]



Witek saw that virtual concerts could reach wider audiences than traditional on-site ones and offer the affordances of collaboration. He wanted to foreground the positive aspects of the Zoom experience. He wanted students to feel “a mission or a purpose” beyond their own isolation in support of the victims and frontline workers. Like the “Dido’s Lament” project, Ithaca College’s “Amazing Grace” rejects big solos and instead focuses on small collaborations among many people. In a fascinating torquing of “big and high” versus “small and low,” the project takes a folk song, arranging and performing it with properties adopted from classical music. It amplifies the quotidian performance history of folk songs in churches, demonstrations, and funerals with formally trained players who are just starting out in their careers.

Both videos counter a culture of melancholic individualism exemplified in Andrea Bocelli’s staged spectacles. They democratize the content and multiply the number of voices within a participatory model that focuses on repositioning and transforming something small into something big while simultaneously remaining small and short for file-sharing and social media platforms.

Rather than hovering high above vacant structures that are inaccessible to most of us, performing for high-end cameras strapped to remote-controlled drones, these videos move down low to the level of our laptops. By streaming images from inside individual homes, they create a multi-directional penetration of private spaces that converge in a created and mediated semipublic space.

Rather than dazzling us with the big budget needed to stage a professional performance, they reward us with insights into what can be achieved with relatively little. They ask us to ponder, not only what is useful during the pandemic, but what is achievable when we work together towards causes that are bigger than ourselves—and bigger than celebrity egos.

Recollecting the pandemic's origins in documentaries on China

One of the most iconic images of the first-wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was aerial drone footage of Wuhan during the lockdown. Streets, highways, and bridges were relatively empty of pedestrian and car traffic. In the footage, cars move in relative isolation, suggesting the collapse of a world system of transportation. Connections to the world suddenly shifted from advantages for global business to disadvantages in vulnerability.

Wuhan was placed under lockdown at 10:00 on 23 January 2020, 24 days after the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission reported deaths eventually related to the novel coronavirus.[21] Drone images of the airport seems like a camera panning over a still photograph since the airplanes remain static, tethered to tarmacs or connected to jetways. In some ways, the images conjure memories of the still images on the jetty at the Orly Airport in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (France, 1962), which included aerial photography of Paris devastated by bombardment.

Remarkably, there are no signs of movement in drone videos over Wuhan's airport that serves more than 20 million passengers annually. China Southern Airlines connects Wuhan to major cities and transfer airports, including Bangkok, Dubai, Hong Kong, Istanbul, Moscow, New York, Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo. The images from Wuhan of empty streets and an inert airport are all the more unnerving since the city was placed on lockdown just days before Chinese New Year, which fell on 25 January 2020. Typically, people would be returning home for the holiday with a travel rush that starts 15 days before the New Year and continues for 40 days. The roadways and airports would ordinarily have been full of people. Instead, the people were inside, not airport terminals, shopping malls, or office building, but homes and also hospitals. The "big and high" images partly obscure what is happening in the city, but the "small and low" images stay at ground level to move inside ambulances, ERs, and ICUs.

With the passing of time, documentary filmmakers have gathered footage and edited it into some of the first analyses of the pandemic's origins in Wuhan. Shot in four hospitals in Wuhan, *76 Days* (United States/China, 2020; dir. Weixi Chen and Hao Wu) opens with the chaos of hospitals trying to cope with unprecedented demands. Handheld cameras try to keep up. Hospital workers in full gowns sleep on benches in corridors. Hospital staff interpret phone calls for intubated ICU patients. Staff queue to have tape applied to seal their gowns in hopes of blocking the virus. Because of their PPE, hospital staff are all but unrecognizable, so they write names on the gowns, so that they can identify one another. There are boxes filled with bags that contain the ID cards and mobile phones of the deceased. One phone rings and flashes, indicating unread messages. Nurses perform affective labor to calm frightened patients. They spoon-feed patients too weak to eat by themselves. A Party member's son tries to shame his demanding father to stop

Images from *76 Days*. Weixi Chen and Hao Wu [United States/China: *76 Days*, 2020]



Drone view of ambulance races down an empty highway.

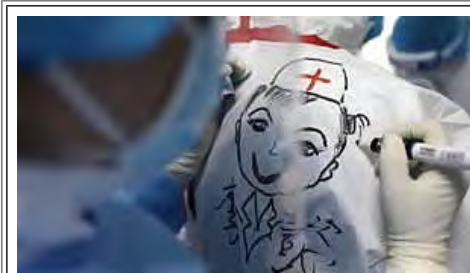


Ground-level view of doctor in crowded hospital corridor.



Hospital gowns are sealed from infiltration.

complaining so much to doctors and other staff. A baby is born. A son is afraid to collect his father from the hospital, fearing he is not cured. By 16 February 2020, there are 50 patients.



Hospital gowns are labeled to identify doctors and nurses.

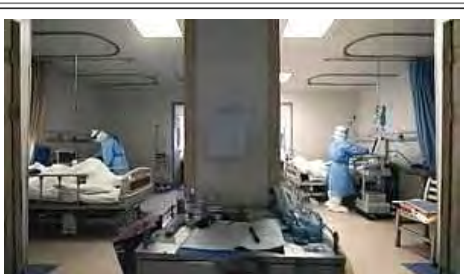


Newborn in Wuhan hospital.

Outside, announcements enjoin citizens to obey recommendations and refrain from spreading rumors. On empty streets, banners recommend: “Staying Home Makes A Happy Family.” People disinfect the streets. Nurses disinfect the people. The film concludes with head nurse Yang Li, phoning families to return belongings of the deceased. On 04 April 2020, air-raid sirens mark a day of remembrance for everyone who died. Four days later, the lockdown was lifted after 76 days. The film focuses on the visceral experiences of the pandemic without making any connections to the causes of the virus or its symptoms beyond lung function. It presents the pandemic in Wuhan much differently than the drone footage.



Sterilizing inside of the hospital.



Every room in ICU is full.



Patients are invisible under equipment and staff.



Medical staff work under layers of PPE to safeguard themselves while treating their patients.

Coronation (Germany/China, 2020; dir. Ai Weiwei) makes a less observational

Images from *Coronation*. Ai Weiwei
[Germany/China: AWW Germany, 2020]



Opening drone video of Wuhan under lockdown.



Medical professionals fight to keep patients alive.



Doctors and nurses wear two layers of hospital gowns.



Doctors are hardly visible under layers of protective equipment.

and more critical analysis of the events in December 2019, suggesting that China suppressed information by preventing people from leaving Wuhan. The film opens with a man returning to Wuhan in Hubei province by car during lockdown. A woman at a petrol station reports him for his car's Hubei plates, but police allow him pass after his temperature is recorded. In a contrast to the opening, taken from down low, the film then offers a view from high up as drone footage shows the snow-covered city. From the human noises of conversation and breathing of the scene down low, the soundtrack shifts to an electronic beat. The footage then returns to down low, and shots of patients in the sanitary white spaces of ICUs reveal a diametrically different sense of white space. Rather than a detachment from the earth, the camera's perspective seems tethered to the doctors and nurses who navigate tight overwhelmed spaces, and patients who seem trapped beneath the life-support systems.

The film continues this disorienting movement from “big and high” to “small and low” and back again with more techno music over images of the rapid construction of emergency hospitals. The emotional cues of the music are starkly different from the optimistic tones of a time-lapse video posted by China Global Television Network.[22] Ai layers music over video images that are shared with him in exile in Germany by citizen journalists back in China, and his musical choices are unnerving. In an interview, a construction worker who came to Wuhan to help build the hospital, discloses that he is not allowed to leave. He lives inside a truck that is parked in a parking garage. He and other construction workers are forced to use toilets at petrol stations. State officials tell them not to give interviews or “something bad” will happen. Despite China's impressive response in constructing emergency hospitals seemingly overnight, many involved in this spectacular labor and enormous task are trapped in a bigger bureaucratic machine. While the government produced time-lapse videos of the construction from drone-level, residents of Wuhan gathered images of construction workers and recorded their statements as they waited for permission to return home.

In addition to his exhibitions in art museums and biennales, Ai came to international attention beyond art aficionados for his blog and *Student Name List* of 5,212 child-victims of 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province. Many were killed when cheaply constructed schools collapsed. The earthquake disaster, as Zhang Zhen argues,

“ignited the explosion of ‘citizen journalism’ in its aftermath and seems to have played a cataclysmic role in consolidating and rapidly expanding an emerging ‘citizen documentation’ movement in the digital era.”[23]

Ai believes that information belongs to the public, but China does not always share this belief. After his Sina Weibo blog was shut down by the state, he switched to twitter. He has made over twenty documentaries, which he often distributes freely on DVD or online. He co-curated the *Uncooperative Attitude* (titled *Fuck Off* in English) art exhibition in 2000. He was detained in 2011 for 81 days, then fined CN¥15.5 million (U.S.\$2.4 million) for taxes.

Ai produced and directed *Coronation* remotely from Berlin, working with residents of Wuhan. As one review notes, their cameras offer perspectives on the city strikingly different from those of the state's ubiquitous surveillance camera work.[24] Perched atop street lights and buildings, the government's elevated points-of-view through the lenses of top-quality cameras differs significantly from the street-level shots on mobile phones by ordinary residents. Their devices gaze back at the state, not only for trying to divert their attention from the virus in the early days, but also to China's Social Credit System, which rates citizens based on



Sanitizing the streets.



Make-do solutions for hospitals beyond capacity.



Going through the motions.



Medical wastes in unimaginable quantities.

a variety of information, including video evidence of violations of the law such as jaywalking or playing music too loudly on public transportation.[25] The interplay of the state's invisible mechanisms of power are resisted by the hypervisibility of Wuhan residents, documenting with their mobiles in gestures that lacks the iconicity of the high-angle image. "Tank Man" is an iconic image of an unarmed and unprotected citizen who blocked an advancing column of army tanks on Tiananmen Square in June 1989. The video images in Ai's film are no less powerful.

Coronation emphasizes what happens on the ground. As nurses arrive in the city, a woman asks them not to say anything about the virus. She informs them simply to wave and directs them to buses. Inside the hospital, another story emerges. Doctors and nurses follow a careful process of wearing two gowns, one over the other. They check for possible air leaks. Since everyone looks the same under the protective equipment, they write names on their apparel, so that people can be identified. CCTV monitors on 16 January 2020 show one doctor following protocols through a series of three changing rooms. He must dispose of one layer of PPE, then wash his gloved hands before preceding to next room. His blood oxygen level is measured afterwards.

The film also shows the effects of the lockdown on the city's residents. Home deliveries of groceries are among the few signs of movement in otherwise empty streets. Deliverers and recipients seem unsure how to interact. Others do not have the financial means for home delivery. Supplies from Tibet, including mineral water and yak meat, are sent to help people in Wuhan live under such circumstances. Other scenes show people who must work during the lockdown, for instance, workers disinfecting streets. Ai's editing of the film, however, gradually begins to erode viewers' trust in official reports and images. An older woman and her son chat during lockdown. As a former union leader who received awards, she says that he speaks like Party member. They hear news reports on infection rates in New York and California, and her son tells the woman that China uses GPS on phones to track spread. People get codes on smartphones; otherwise quarantine and pay.

The film makes its critique more directly toward the end. Rather than shocking images inside ERs and ICUs, it shows images, even more shocking in a different way, of efforts to suppress the transmission of information about the virus. Workers must swear allegiance to the Party and its secrets. Women perform the gesture of proper handwashing techniques to songs that seems more political than medical in their intent. A woman explains how people were unable to get treatment and died and how some were listed as dying from other causes. Images of massive amounts of medical waste suggest the resources needed to contain the virus's spread. Other resources are allocated to marking the lockdown's end, including official portraits and dazzling light shows on buildings. Images of this spectacle are records of the official staging of state propaganda and promotion.

These public views from "big and high" are undercut by interviews taken on the ground. A man complains about inaccurate information from government, such as assuring people that there was no human-to-human spread. He shows video on his mobile of his father Zhang Lifa on a ventilator at the hospital. The man also complains about being closely monitored like others who have lost family to coronavirus. He wonders why the state spends money on watching them rather than allocating it to more urgent purposes. Ai's collaborators' cameras later follow the man as he navigates the bureaucracy in order to collect his father's ashes. Ai follows with images of men compressing bags with the ashes of the deceased to cram into wooden boxes that are wrapped in red cloth and given to family.

The film ends with sorrowful acoustic music over people praying. It closes with

this text:

"The first case of Covid-19 appeared in Wuhan on December 1st, 2019. For several weeks officials concealed information about the virus' human-to-human transmission and its infection and mortality rates. On January 23rd, 2020, Wuhan was put under lockdown. By August 2020, Covid-19 has spread to over 200 countries with more than 17 million confirmed cases and 700,000 deaths worldwide."



Light show to celebrate the end of lockdown.



Image of his father of a ventilator.



Families collect the remains of their deceased loved ones.

The film does not mention Dr. Li Wenliang, who died at age 34 from COVID-19 in February 2020 after attempting to warn the WHO. It mentions people whose stories were ignored by big media, but there are others that the film does not report—stories that were ignored by both Chinese state media and also by non-Chinese media, eager to make Li a celebrity as a political jab at China.

What is striking is that most English-language reviews of the film are illustrated with an aerial drone shot of the city under lockdown, as is Ai's website. It might be that news editors and Ai's web designer fail to notice how the film uses low-level shots as a counterpoint to traditional narrative cinema's establishing shots. But it could also be that many of us are afraid to see what is actually happening. The preference for professional quality views from "big and high" to imperfect ones from "small and low" enters into the film's reception by the international film festival and film distribution community. "According to organisers of the Venice festival, censorship had nothing to do with their decision [to reject *Coronation*], dictated instead by aesthetic and cinematographic considerations," reports Cecilia Dardana. Venice was not alone in making the film harder for audiences to find. Regarding its future on the streaming services, she explains:

"Netflix, instead, has stated that it is working on its own documentary about the pandemic." [26]

It is difficult to determine which of these "big and high" decisions is more counterproductive. Netflix's protection of its own financial investment in a competing documentary seems to contradict its supply-driven business model of subscription VOD to offer as much content as possible. Venice's decision, allegedly based on production values and artistic preferences, demonstrates why the A-list western festivals started to become antiquated in an increasingly globalized world long before the pandemic made in-person festival experiences unsafe.

Aesthetic judgment is always a political statement, and politics are located in social practices. Hollywood's Oscars are often the benchmark for conservative politics, but *Coronation* reveals that Venice, like Berlin, Cannes, and Sundance, reject what they cannot understand. They are other brands of "big and high." *Coronation*, however, is more complicated than its nonwestern "aesthetics and cinematography" that challenge the gatekeepers of western film festivals with evidence that there is a limit to their knowledge. While Ai is a highly respected and well-known filmmaker, this film is compiled of footage by nonprofessionals whose concern for the urgency of documenting what is happening exceeds formal concerns, thus pointing to Venice's failure to acknowledge the urgency of the moment.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *Yemen: Coronavirus in a War Zone*.
Nawal Al-Maghafi [United Kingdom: BBC, 2020]



Aerial shots of old Sanaa hides the suffering that happens on the ground.



Official response of sanitizing streets in Sanaa.

Entering Yemen with a camera and a small crew

Another important element of our modalities of “big and high” and “small and low” is investigative journalism that goes to small places where foreign interests in war can *trump* public health. Western media notices from time to time on the Syrian civil war, particularly when families fleeing violence are categorized as a “refugee crisis” for the European Union.

Since fewer Yemeni refugees cross the Mediterranean into Europe, Yemen’s civil war is largely ignored, particularly by U.S. media given the U.S. role in supporting the war. *Yemen: Coronavirus in a War Zone* (United Kingdom, 2020) opens with “big and high” images of old Sanaa, then moves quickly into scenes of director/producer Nawal Al-Maghafi of BBC interviewing people in a crowded market where no one wears a mask. It is April 2020, and people either think the virus will not come to them, has already left, or they simply cannot afford not to work. Al-Maghafi returns three months later in July. In northern Houthi-controlled Yemen, where a quarter of its population at risk of malnutrition, only four deaths for COVID-19 have been reported. The “big and high” of official statistics do not seem credible, so she goes to investigate for herself.

Yemeni ministers criticize Saudi Arabia for blocking humanitarian aid, and the government’s propaganda videos boast of authorities’ efforts to combat the virus through sanitation and disinfection programs, yet videos posted by citizens on social media report 400 to 500 deaths. Doctors report young patients dying within a week because they arrived too late to be properly treated. Houthi teams pick up the sick to transport them to hospitals and collect bodies of the deceased left on the streets. Condolences to victims appear on social media.



Patients fill the corridors in a hospital beyond capacity.



Cemetery where burials never seem to stop despite official death statistics.

But conditions in Yemen go far beyond the virus. Dr. Ehab, a Yemeni pediatrician, says that more children die of malnutrition than coronavirus. Unlike Houthis, who have minimized mortality rates, the medical association in Yemen is open about more than 100 deaths. Conditions in Yemen complicate the assessment of COVID-19’s effects. Doctors at one government hospital have not been paid since 2016, and the World Health Organization has also stopped paying doctors because of cuts in funding as the pandemic hit and monopolized resources.

Dr. Tariq, another Yemeni physician, must contend with little protective equipment for staff, limited oxygen, and too many patients. He receives no salary to support his family. Houthi disinformation increases the spread of the virus. In



Dr. Zoha is among few doctors and nurses at Al Amal Hospital in Aden.







Fragile human bodies under medical equipment.

Aden, where the Yemeni government is in exile, the infection peaked in May, but there is little testing, so accurate figures are not available. Panic forced the government to shut all hospitals except Al Amal. Among doctors, Dr. Zoha remained with one nurse, seven ventilators, and a few oxygen cylinders after everyone else left.

For an entire month, the hospital was not able to save a single patient. Since the leadership was in exile in Saudi Arabia, so health care administration in Yemen was virtually nonexistent. For instance, by the time doctors were paid, many had already left. Later, Médecins sans frontière (MSF or Doctors without Borders) was given permission to take over from local managers, which brought desperately needed supplies to the area. Doctors returned, but rumors of MSF giving lethal injections and stealing equipment spread. Because of this and other security issues, MSF left Al Amal and then another hospital.

In Aslam in the north, Saudi raids with U.S. bombs displaced 3.5 million people from their homes. Two million children are starving. At her clinic, Nurse Makiah al-Aslami treats children who have suffered extreme malnutrition. For her, coping with the virus is not a priority. She wants people to find a vaccine for the war.

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|  |  |
| <p>Family home in Aslam destroyed by Saudi bomb supplied by the United States.</p> | <p>Steadfastly, Nurse Makiah al-Aslami cares for victims of the war.</p> |
|  |  |
| <p>Displaced by Saudi raids with US bombs, children suffered extreme malnutrition in Aslam.</p> | <p>Laughing, Nurse Makiah al-Aslami wants a vaccine for war.</p> |

Like Ai's *Coronation*, Al-Maghafi's documentary fails to satisfy the "aesthetics" that politically conservative film festivals like Venice demand. Both films reject the single-character, narrative arc structuring device. Unlike Ai's film, Al-Maghafi's documentary has found distribution through Journeyman Films, perhaps because her work as a journalist distills and clarifies information to audiences. As a journalist for BCC, she also works within big media's frameworks for making events legible. Her documentary reminds us of what we already know:

the spectacles of war and even the pandemic can distract us from deadly but less novel and visible ills. By demanding to see the “big and high” images we forget to notice the “small and low,” often disproportionately affected by the pandemic’s direct and indirect effects.

Provisional reflections across oceans and continents

This essay represents a very provisional mapping of some of our emerging observations and theorizations on the form, function, and meaning of media produced during the COVID-19 pandemic. These projects counter the usual modality of “big and high” that depends on propagating hysteria, invoking politicians and experts, and fashioning spectacles.

The pandemic has actually disrupted corporatized systems of media production, distribution, and exhibition. No one knows or understands its scope despite what either devotees or skeptics of streaming might say. A *Deadline Hollywood* article on the effects of the pandemic on Hollywood’s domestic market points out that revenues are down 80%, with 4,000 cinemas closed down. AMC, the largest theater chain in the United States, sought to stave off bankruptcy. Tentpole films have been delayed release until 2021 in hopes that vaccinations will bring spectators back to theaters.

In the new ecology of streaming, all studios are confronting the emerging and constantly-in-flux business models of shortened theatrical windows. “Through the past year, studios scrambled to put their movies in the home, debated whether to delay tentpoles for the big screen and experimented with their new-found streaming services,” the *Deadline Hollywood* article contended. [27] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Hollywood’s idea of scalable strategies has emerged even in the typically slow-to-respond commercial corporate media industries. For instance, Chilean filmmaker Pablo Larraín’s *Homemade* is designed to offer an array of different perspectives. [28] But as we have argued elsewhere, the episodes default to rather outdated and sometimes problematic festival-circuit model of auteurism that promulgate a vision of privileged artistry and introspection often shorn from any political or social context or urgency. We have analyzed other kinds of media produced during the pandemic that is placed-based, more modest in its production values, designed to circulate. It is a resilient and urgent media high in use value.

Specifically, we argued for a modality of “small and low” in media as a counterpart that is more easily located but sometimes less accessible to audiences used to movie theaters, broadcast and cable television, and streaming services. We look to short-form videos being produced in Australia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia that are uploaded to EngageMedia. We probe short films by aspiring and emerging woman filmmakers from Africa that focus on the secondary effects of lockdowns on the bodies and psyches of women. We unpack collaborations between professional and amateur musicians and singers that reimagine live performance over video-conferencing software in western countries. We dive into feature-length documentaries about the pandemic’s earliest days in China, edited together from the video footage of citizen journalists. We analyze investigative journalism that goes “small and low” to examine the situation in Yemen, where civilians are already suffering the effects of war and are all the more vulnerable to the worst consequences of COVID-19.

These “small and low” media share some commonalities that might point the way forward in this constantly changing and adaptive media ecology. They complicate the easy take-aways from the distant perspective of “big and high” media to focus instead on granular and sometimes irritating details of interconnection, local

expertise, and context. They refuse the perspectives of state officials and nationalist power on the world stage and instead insist on community, equity, and caring. They refuse the national and global, situating instead in specific places. They reject the idea of big personalities and instead refocus on ways that many can collaborate and participate.

Postscript

As health professionals mention again and again, whether conventional “dead” virus or mRNA, vaccines are only as effective when they can be administered. The scale of the pandemic makes global vaccination impossible for several years, so we are asked to do our part.

The pandemic’s spread will increase exponentially with the appearance of more variants of the virus. Variants have emerged in places where the virus’s transmission has not been contained. As a virus, SARS-CoV-2 naturally mutates as a mode of survival, so increased infection rates become increased opportunities for mutation, which might even mean decreased efficacy of vaccines.

We need a second wave of COVID-19 media to focus our attention on these issues and also to decondition us from our complacent acceptance of the rates of infection and death. And, finally, we need these new forms of COVID-19 media to remind us that the climate crisis, domestic violence, and malnutrition are among the many conditions entwined with the pandemic. Just as we cannot treat physical symptoms without also addressing their psychological consequences, we cannot continue to look at the pandemic only from the perspective of what is “big and high.”

If first-wave COVID-19 media educated us about public-health protocols and the effects of quarantines, curfews, masking, and lockdowns, then the second wave needs to educate us about the ongoing dangers not only of SARS-CoV-2 but also of 501Y.V1 (United Kingdom variant), 501Y.V2 (South Africa variant), P1 (Brazil variant), B.1.426 (California variant), and the estimated 4,000 variants plus others to come.

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Notes

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from Angela Aguayo's *Documentary Resistance*:



Early members of the Free the West Memphis Three group meet with reporter Mara Leveritt to explain how they became involved as activist in a scene from *Paradise Lost 2: Revelations* (2000).



College activists organize online, turning their living spaces into community organizing spaces, a scene from the *Hunting Ground* (2015).



After Emma Sulkowicz carries a dorm mattress to expose the lack of university accountability for sexual assault, mattresses become a symbol of emotional weight and the lack of justice, a scene

Documentary activism across multiple media platforms

review by [Inez Hedges](#)

Angela Aguayo, *Documentary Resistance: Social Change and Participatory Media*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 296 pp. \$99 hardcover, \$29.95 paperback, \$19.99 e-book;

Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Documentary across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place, and Politics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. 268 pp. \$85 hardcover, \$32 paperback and e-book.

The metaphors by which critics and filmmakers have attempted to capture the moving image's unique ability to bear witness have been many, from Dziga Vertov's "kinoeye" to Peter Wollen's exploration of the indexical in cinema. Any such witnessing is motivated, a notion captured by Alexandre Astruc's "caméra stylo" ("camera as writing instrument"). The very term "cinematography," which comes to us from the pioneering Lumière brothers, implies a kind of writing in the medium of moving images. As with any kind of writing, it is useful to consider the intentions of the makers, the audiences, and modes of circulation. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, all of these elements have been affected in important ways by the rise of new technologies of production and circulation. Both Angela Aguayo and Patricia Zimmermann are acutely focused on these changes and offer conceptual maps for understanding the ways in which documentary has morphed into new forms.

Aguayo is herself the director of three documentary films whose subjects have ranged from "disappeared" women in Mexico to a male chauvinist barbershop in Austin, Texas. Her research on activist documentaries of the past 50 years in the United States is supplemented by dozens of interviews with fellow filmmakers around the country, in the course of which she has uncovered many forgotten films buried in attics and closets. Activist documentary, she argues, can be a *mirror*, helping to create *collective identification*, and a *hammer*, or tool for social change. It can use *affect* to marshal the emotional response of its audience and encourage *agency*, or active involvement in the struggle to make things right. She also proposes an ethics of documentary filmmaking. She advocates *participatory media* in which the subjects of the documentary are involved in the filmmaking process as against the *political tourism* of film crews from outside the community who show up to document injustice and suffering and leave the situation unchanged as they depart.

In her second and third chapters, she maps out an example of a successful documentary practice exemplified by the *vitality*, *agency*, and *virality* surrounding the making and reception of the HBO films *Paradise Lost*, *the Child Murders* and *Robin Hood Hills* (1996) and *Paradise Lost Revisited* (2000). The first film suggested that the three teenage boys accused of the murder of three

from the *Hunting Ground* (2015).



In *Wisconsin Rising* (2014) solidarity is forged across many different communities of workers.



younger boys in Memphis were falsely convicted. Audiences reacted to the first film with *vitality*, creating message boards and forming the “Free the Memphis Three” movement whose *agency* enlisted media publicity and expert legal advice as well as holding demonstrations. Finally, the diffusion of these efforts via television (Larry King Live), celebrity interviews and the internet website created a *virality* that made the issue impossible to ignore. The three boys were eventually released from prison, one of them from death row. Aguayo comments,

“The *Paradise Lost* phenomenon marks the beginning of a much-theorized and new form of democratic practice facilitated by popular documentary distribution, true crime sleuthing, and the internet. *Paradise Lost* highlights the potential of high-profile, popular, and mass-distributed documentary discourse to create a collective audience identification invested in instrumental political action” (80).

In other chapters she demonstrates how activist videos documenting the rape culture in the military (*Invisible War*, 2012) and on campuses (*Hunting Ground*, 2015) have led to the drafting and even enacting of new legislation (Military Justice Improvement Act, enacted 2013; Campus Accountability and Safety Act, died in committee in 2015). On the other hand, Aguayo warns against counter-reactions, arguing that the right-wing group Citizens United’s organizing against Michael Moore’s exposé of the G. W. Bush administration in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) eventually led to the Supreme court case *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission* (2010). That decision opened the floodgates to unlimited election contributions from super-PACS (74-75).

In her research Aguayo traveled the country, uncovering private archives of films and videos documenting the history of black America, of labor conditions and struggles, of the experiences of migrant farm workers, of women’s issues in the workplace. She argues for the *vernacular cinematic language* of films and videos made by participants in these cultures which are stored in private archives, forgotten films that should be remembered and restored so that they can become part of the public record, commenting that “labor documentary helps the audience recognize itself as an object, a capitalist commodity” (105). One of the earliest influential films she cites is *A Day at Tuskegee* (1909), which depicted the vocational training of black men and women at the Tuskegee Institute. The film was shown in Carnegie Hall. In the early 20th Century, the Frederick Douglass Film Company sponsored films about black soldiers in WWI to counter the effect of D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). In the 1930s, films made by the Workers’ Film and Photo League served as organizing tools for workers. Many of these early films were later picked up as sources for footage in the 1960s and 70s. Aguayo notes that clips from the works of union organizer and filmmaker Harvey Richards, who documented labor struggles and the lives of migrant workers between 1958 and 1978, have been used in over 70 other subsequent productions.

Aguayo provides a useful guide through the last five decades of documentary history, a history she has been instrumental in discovering. She comments “The nonfiction image fixes people in history, like a stamp of authentication or a photographic trail of existence” (129). In addition, she calls attention to women filmmakers that are not as well-known as Barbara Kopple, such as Heather Courtney (*Los Trabajadores*, 2003) Anne Lewis (*Morristown*, 2007) and Amie Williams (*We Are Wisconsin*, 2011). She describes how Tami Gold at New York Newsreel and Judi Hoffman at Chicago’s Kartemquin Film Collective have used video for social change “by inscribing activist elements into the production process” (142). In her discussion of labor documentary Aguayo offers her understanding of the way collective identification works:

“Collective identification can take place long before a film is screened.

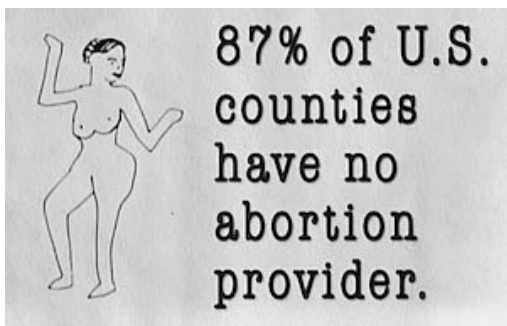
A local activist shares her experience of the uprisings after the death of Michael Brown in *Whose Streets* (2017) directed by Sabaah Foleyan.



As police descend into the neighborhood of Ferguson, MO a woman approaches police with her hands up in *Whose Streets* (2017).



Director Penny Lane comforts someone she is interviewing in *Abortion Diaries* (2005).



Director Penny Lane uses hand drawn title cards to include her journal entries describing her own experience in *Abortion Diaries* (2005).

It is a function of how the director understands the relationship between him or herself and the community being recorded; it is in the way vernacular communities are integrated into the creative process; and it is endemic to the circulation of documentary discourse and its connection to movements of people organizing for change” (147).

The relationship between filmmaker and community is starkly foregrounded in citizens’ filming of police brutality. A complicating factor is the morphing of such “street tapes” through a multiplicity of platforms and *media ecologies* that are now available: live-streaming broadcasts, memes, podcasts, Tumblr, and Reddit. Aguayo suggests that such *mobile cinema* footage, which has gone viral in several recent instances (the police murders of Eric Garner and Philando Castile), should preferably come from insiders to the community (as in the case of Philando Castile’s murder, filmed and livestreamed by his girlfriend Diamond Reynolds who was in the car with him). Otherwise, she argues, it reinforces the stereotype of black bodies as victims rather than active subjects with agency (184). “Who is going to build community around this work?” she asks, commenting that “digital culture brings with it abundance, but in the absence of a concerted effort to collect and preserve vernacular history, it can quickly slip from the official record” (224). More promising for activist organization, she argues, are documentaries like *Whose Streets?* (2017)—on the uprising in Ferguson, Missouri, after the shooting of Michael Brown—which recycled street tapes, tweets and social media posts into a finished product that can be widely circulated.

In her chapter on films about abortion, Aguayo focuses on “how documentary practices engage affects, feelings, and emotions as strategies of activism and resistance” (152). The problem of dealing with, and releasing women from, feelings of guilt and shame resides in large part with the *female heritage tale* that presents motherhood as woman’s purpose and destiny. But here Aguayo finds an additional complication as she contrasts *mobility feminism* with *intersectional feminism*. Mobility feminism seeks to release women from the heritage tale by stressing career and professional self-fulfillment. Aguayo dismisses this as a predominantly white neoliberal, middle-class mindset. Intersectional feminism, which characterizes abortion films since 2010, offers “a greater reflexivity about class and race, an awareness of the social and political structures that funnel women into choiceless circumstances” (155). Aguayo contrasts the intersectional film *Abortion Diaries* (2005) by independent filmmaker Penny Lane with the neoliberal attitudes in *I Had an Abortion* (2005) by Jillian Aldrich and Jennifer Baumgardner, which was financed by commercial feminist establishments. Aguayo argues that while the second film leaves women open to the critique of narcissism in their rejection of the female heritage myth, *Abortion Diaries* allows women to speak their own truth. She comments,

“Women publicly declaring their experience with abortion contributes to the ongoing project of normalizing the medical procedure” (171).

Finally, Aguayo addresses films such as *Trapped* (2016), *12th and Delaware* (2010), and *Abortion: Stories Women Tell* (2016) that portray the violence directed against abortion clinics, and the desperation of women who live in states that have restricted women’s access to abortion. She comments,

“This wave of abortion documentary is distinct in the way it directly confronts the heritage myth and the hypocrisy of the anti- abortion protestors” (179).

Aguayo has developed many useful terms for naming the strategies of activist documentaries. In her conclusion she proposes that these can be applied elsewhere, in Native American struggles and ecological media activism. I wish she had also dealt with censorship and repression by the State; a prominent example



Les Levesque's *4 Vertigo* (2000) reworks Hollywood to undermine it.



Negativland, *No Business* (2005) urges "illegal" downloading and copyright infringement (2005).



Negativland, *No Business*, thumbs its nose at sharing music files.

is the attack on Wikileaks after the release of the "Collateral Damage" video by Chelsea Manning. Finally, a list of distributors for some of the lesser-known titles would also have been useful to educators and programmers.

Patricia Zimmermann's *Documentary across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place and Politics* casts a wide net, capturing media ecologies as varied as museum installations, film festival showings, photography, and multiple varieties of internet sharing. A Professor of Screen Studies at Ithaca College and a widely published *doyenne* of documentary studies, Zimmermann is frequently in demand nationally and internationally as a speaker at film festivals, museum and gallery openings, national and international conferences. The present book is a collection of such talks, eclectic, wide-ranging and groundbreaking. The metaphor *reverse engineering* that she has chosen as a way of organizing these various media ecologies aims to gather them under the shared purpose of "dismantling and rebuilding of the world through conceptual redesign" (2). She defines their political engagement as "active renegotiations to create new imaginaries of possible futures" (3).

Several of the interventions she discusses take apart existing media and recombine them in ways that undermine their original messages. Les Levesque *remediates* Hollywood films, as in the 8'56" remix *4 Vertigo* (2000), extracting individual frames from Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and editing them according to complex algorithms. The British group Negativland playfully thumbs its nose at copyright laws, celebrating the downloading of "protected" content in *No Business* (2005). Many of these subversive strategies recall the *détournement* advocated by Situationist Guy Debord in the 1960s and 70s.

In the section titled "Reversals," grouping essays on war, Zimmermann discusses the way new technologies of Internet distribution (digital media and Flash) amplify the voices of resistance to the dominant narratives. She describes the way that the International Action Center, a political action group in the U.S., produced *NATO targets* (1999) as a counter-narrative to the official media's portrayal of the bombings in Serbia, showing the effects on the ground and inventing "a new matrix that restored context and consequences to historical action" (p. 98). *The Shocking and Awful Series* (2004) by Deep Dish TV moved outside the official media portrayals of the war in Iraq to bring forward the voices of Iraqis, anti-war activists, and military personnel speaking off the record to nonembedded journalists. *Fallujah* (2005) by the activist group Code Pink documented the destruction of that city and compared it to the bombing of Guernica. Zimmermann acknowledges that similar counternarratives are sponsored by the far right.

The opening chapter provides a cogent map of interrelations between the gaming industry and the U. S. military industrial complex. Zimmermann shows how these same tools are "reverse engineered" to undermine power, with the emergence in the first decade of the 21st century of antiwar games on sites such as newsgaming.com, watercoolergames.com, seriousgames.org and opensorcery.net (18). She notes how in Malaysia, the pirating of Disney films and other Hollywood products functions as a way to resist globalization and the control of multinational corporations (21).

Worldwide there has been an explosion of media across different platforms, and many of the essays offer useful ways of talking about these new ecologies. In one essay, Zimmermann discusses the work of Daniel Reeves, a Vietnam vet and video artist. In his video *Obsessive Becoming* (1995), he links images from the Vietnam war and WWII to his memories of family violence. Zimmermann explores this work as a processing of trauma, commenting,



Deep Dish TV: *Shocking and Awful*, protests against the Iraq War (2004).



Deep Dish TV: *Shocking and Awful* (2004) uses voices of Iraqis, anti-war activists, and military personnel.



Daniel Reeves installation *Eingang: The Way In* (1990).

“Reeves’ videos push to possibilities of camera-vision to unlock authenticity and transcendence through seeing and revisioning, often in layering of images, slow-motion images, or associative montage connected through dissolves that function almost like metaphorical bandages to the traumas within” (45-46).

Reeves later moved to creating important installation art pieces such as *The Hand That Holds Up All this Falling* (1997) and the internationally exhibited *Eingang: The Way In* (1990). The latter included volcanic rocks and Scottish beach stones as well as HD monitors inserted into large segments of tree trunks. The monitors displayed images from around the world. Zimmermann comments,

“*Eingang* suggests a post-1989, post-Cold War memorial to the end of arbitrary political and historical borders” (52).

Zimmermann reflects on the lack of documentation of live multimedia performance, an absence that this book tries to remedy. Too much emphasis, she argues, is placed on texts, as opposed to what she describes as “the sprawling, historically significant area of media practice that configures relationships between images, music, people, spaces, and technology” (215). She cites a 2004 event at Ithaca College, where students produced *Within Our Gates Revisited and Remixed* (based on the 1920 silent film by Oscar Micheaux) with live music from hip hop culture. She comments,

“As the dominant commercialized practices of digitality desensitize, disconnect, disembody, and isolate, the layered histories of live multimedia performance remind us that gatherings of people still matter” (215).

She reflects that media scholars now have to take in multiple forms of exhibition and distribution: “activist groups, the art world, campuses, concert halls, media centers, museums, online communities, political groups, and specific local communities” (4). Her book is bound to create new paths for exploration and to open up a new awareness of the richness and complexity of the global media landscape.

As with *Documentary Resistance*, I would have liked a discussion of the censorship that some of this activist media is confronted with, as well as some concrete internet links and distribution networks. Here are a few links that I found or know from personal experience:

Daniel Reeves website:

<https://www.danthelion.com/eingang--the-way-in.html>

Collateral murder (Wikileaks via Chelsea Manning)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=is9sxRfU-ik>

Shocking and awful: Globalization at Gunpoint (Deep Dish TV)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3D1X6YyI4E0>



Collateral Murder: Iraqi men in the sights of the U.S. helicopter just before their murders (Wikileaks, 2010).

Negativland: *No Business* (by a U.K. collage art collective)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9y4MHPY2m4>

4 Vertigo (Les Leveque)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0C2QMWETNKI&t=13s>

New Immigrant and Refugee Visions (Community Supported Films, Boston)

<http://csfilm.org/films/new-immigrant-and-refugee-visions/>

Media in motion (Berlin and Zagreb)

<https://vimeo.com/mediainmotion>

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Goosey connections: a little detour en route

by Queer TV Special Section editor [Joëlle Rouleau](#)



How do we look?

There is a fuss (and a fuss yet to be made!) around queer media, and I embrace it as I edit this special section on Queer TV for *Jump Cut*.



To my mind, “queer” is an amorphous goo that you cannot hold or control, that seeps into everything—it is both a deeply bad and good word. I love “goo” because it is profoundly playful, and profoundly gross. Goo sums up the stickiness, the slipperiness of boundaries, the ambiguity and tension that make up queer culture, since “queer” now encompasses issues of identity, gender, theory, politics, and culture. As a cultural studies scholar, I find it antithetical to try to integrate queer culture within a predetermined methodological or theoretical conceptualization. Why try and pin down goo? Thus, I use the term “queer sensibilities” (Muñoz 2009, Nash 2010) or “queerity” (Nowlan, 2010) to describe what I mean when I talk about queerness. This not only allows for an extensive and shifting conception of that culture, but it also underscores a need to refrain from establishing what is or is not queer, what does or does not belong to the goo. In my writing and my teaching, I try to interrogate what viewers and researchers of various mediatic forms might perceive of or read as “queer”. The notion of “sensibilities” allows me to consider the multiple dimensions of identity which inevitably accompany how we as media viewers (and researchers) position ourselves when thinking about representations of ourselves and our communities.

I am reluctant to ask whether a media representation is faithful to a specific



Overwhelming “queer” choices on Netflix |
March 2021

identity category or not. I find that such identity categories collapse under a signifier such as LGBTQ+. Consequently, that signifier becomes a placeholder for neoliberal, value-hungry strategies to reify the inclusion of sexual diversity, in particular in media representations. Furthermore, an emergence of politically correct[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ themes and representations indicates yet again the rigidity, orthodoxy, and superficiality of the current acceptance of LGBTQ+ realities (the anti-goo!). Of course, socially, I advocate for the development of open, sensible, and progressive measures to work toward a better, more inclusive world. But I question the ideological motivations underlying what has quickly become an abundance of queer representations, especially on television. There is a saying in my own Québécois French: “Trop, c’est comme pas assez,” or, “too much is the same as not enough”. This abundance of representation speaks to an innate bias against its own absence and lack: a hyper(in)visibility[2].

This special section seeks to question the representations, receptions, perverse readings (Staiger, 2000) and fan creations around the so-called LGBTQ+ spectrum in audiovisual media. I see this collection of essays as a probing of/for queer sensibilities. Collectively, we wish to explore the aesthetic and narrative forms of the various cultural objects selected here in a way that asks *Jump Cut* readers to interrogate what these objects produce, both in terms of visibilities and invisibilities. Moreover, taken together, these essays allow readers to think about methodologies in queer media studies, and they encourage readers to compare how the authors’ queer sensibilities relate to their unique objects of study.

Queer sensibilities

As a good “lezzar,” I absolutely despise stand-up comedy. When Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette* came out on Netflix, numerous friends, colleagues and students enthusiastically encouraged me to watch. “But I hate stand-up comedy!” or so I thought. It was only one night, when I found myself lonely, tired, and dispirited, that I reluctantly decided to give Gadsby a try.

I laughed, I cried—so much that it hurt. My reaction as a viewer sent me spinning over my own life and choices. Something happened that I hadn’t expected: I felt that Gadsby was queering stand-up comedy in a way I had never seen before. It’s not about her feminist jokes or her queerness: it has to do with her approach to comedy itself. Gadsby exposes the power dynamics which enable comedy to function culturally. She takes the box consisting of stand-up comedy and folds it in on itself:

“Let me explain to you what a joke is. And when you strip it back to its bare essential... components, like, its bare minimum, a joke is simply two things, it needs two things to work. A setup and a punch line. And it is essentially a question with a surprise answer. Right? But in this context, what a joke is, is a question that I have artificially inseminated. Tension. I do that, that’s my job. I make you all feel tense, and then I make you laugh, and you’re like, “Thanks for that. I was feeling a bit tense.” I made you tense. This is an abusive relationship. Do you know why I’m such a funny fucker? Do you? It’s because, you know, I’ve been learning the art of tension diffusion since I was a children [sic]. Back then it wasn’t a job, wasn’t even a hobby, it was a survival tactic. I didn’t have to invent the tension. I was the tension.” (Gadsby, *Nanette*, 2018)

For Gadsby, to queer stand-up is to no longer be the butt of the joke, but to queer the set up. I love to laugh, and I am a great audience, but my ability to endure teasing and making fun of someone’s experiences (for whatever reason) is

shortened by the years of homophobic bullying I experienced as a queer kid. Today, as a queer feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2016) my relationship to comedy is complicated, because my ability to access most stand-up is shaped by that experience. When Gadsby engages with this trope of the humorless lesbian feminist (“What sort of comedian can’t even make the lesbians laugh? Every comedian ever” [Gadsby, 2018]), she is also acknowledging that something is rotten at the core of stand-up comedy. Queer communities are resplendent with humor—queers love to laugh and to tease, just check out your local drag show, for example—but mainstream stand-up comedy often uses denigration and humiliation as a lever and a tactic of tension and diffusion.



Hannah Gadsby on her failures to quit comedy | TED Talk

Gadsby is well aware of this, and she uses our expectations of comedic tension to explore what it means to use self-deprecating humor as a queer, marginalized individual. Before watching *Nanette*, I was not aware that this is exactly what I do when I teach and when I write. When I crack a joke (which is admittedly not my forte), I humiliate myself as terrain for my queer pedagogy. Engaging with Gadsby’s stand-up made me realize what I had been doing for years: making myself small to make the lessons clear, more accessible, and less dangerous. I soften the edges of my queerness so as not to offend their lack of queer sensibilities, and in doing so I undermine myself.

Since watching Gadsby’s stand-up, my teaching practice has changed, almost without trying. I don’t know if it’s for the better, but I know that I feel more comfortable owning my queerness: how I look, what I say, how I feel, who I am is no longer something that I wish to degrade.

This is how I engage my own queer sensibilities with *Nanette*. I describe this experience to indicate what I think these queer sensibilities might mean, and why I am focusing on this framework in assembling this special section on queer TV. To me, queer sensibilities are the state of being both angry and hopeful, loving and enraged. A queer sensibility contains all of these complicated and overwhelming feelings simultaneously, all of the time. Politically and emotionally, a queer sensibility means not giving up because the world is doomed, but not





Hannah Gadsby | Neuroqueer story about her relationship to a box | Douglas

trying to fix it by patching holes in a sinking boat, either.

Queer sensibilities give us historical flexibility. As Bob Nowlan put it, queer becomes a doing more than simply a way of being:

“For queer theorists, ‘queer’ is, therefore, not so much an adjective or a noun that refers to the broad array of contemporary lesbian and gay identities, but rather a verb that marks out a shifting field of gender and sexual discourses and practices that work ‘to queer’ both the straight and the lesbian. This queering, in other words, proceeds by taking up the position and the interest of those who occupy the sexual margins of mainstream lesbian and gay sub-cultures as well as the far fringes of dominant-straight-culture. In sum, it is not a question of being queer but rather of doing queer.” (Nowlan, 2010: 9)

This special section aims to study the queering of media, the doing of queer, much more than it wishes to study media considered queer or featuring queer representations. I do not want to offer readers a more complex label of some aspect of gender identity; that would be paradoxical. Rather I would like this collection of essays to contribute to subverting and challenging established norms of media production and reception. Such innovations in media scholarship are made possible through our very own queer sensibilities, and I invite you to bring your own to this work.

Queering television as queering media

This collection began with a Queer Television Conference I co-organized with my colleague Marta Boni at the University of Montréal in May 2019. The conference and the experience of editing this special section revealed to me that queer television is intertwined with many other types of media. Of course, many papers here focus on television shows—from animation to documentary, independent to mainstream fiction productions, even talk shows and soaps. But the limits of genre are not clearly defined/definable: is Netflix television or Internet streaming? Do we define Internet streaming through its relation to television? If Netflix, Crave, Prime Video, Hulu, Open Television, or any other streaming platform could broaden our understanding of television, then is a movie produced by such a platform effectively a made-for-TV movie? Or is it something else entirely?

The array of work published here, the amalgam of different objects of study and different levels of focus, may seem too inclusive. However, the assortment of writings reflects my conviction that many older and newer manifestations of media production now fit best under the rubric of television, since television has always shown the potential to bend the frame of its own box (terrible pun intended, and now you know why I don’t make jokes!). As evidenced in the categories listed in the Table of Contents, this vision of television as a “gooey” genre has shaped my mapping of the material at hand. Television is at the center of this special section, but film and video game studies come into our orbit as well.

Queer television

In the introduction to *The Queer Art Of Failure*, Jack Halberstam’s conceptualization of high/low theory resists binary opposition to suggest that these theories depend upon each other as a “model of thinking” (2011: 15). Halberstam extracts this useful *modus operandi* from Stuart Hall’s assertion that “theory is not an end unto itself but “a detour en route to something else” (Hall, 1991: 43) (2011: 15). In my own work, I have found that there is something about

television studies that is more permeable than any other media scholarship, especially if we have a flexible concept of television as integrating networks, web series, streaming platforms, cinema and video games. Television—“c’est tout et rien”. That is to say, it is everything and nothing, at the same time. It is a medium, a technology, an apparatus; it’s also a platform, a narrative art, a system, and an industry.

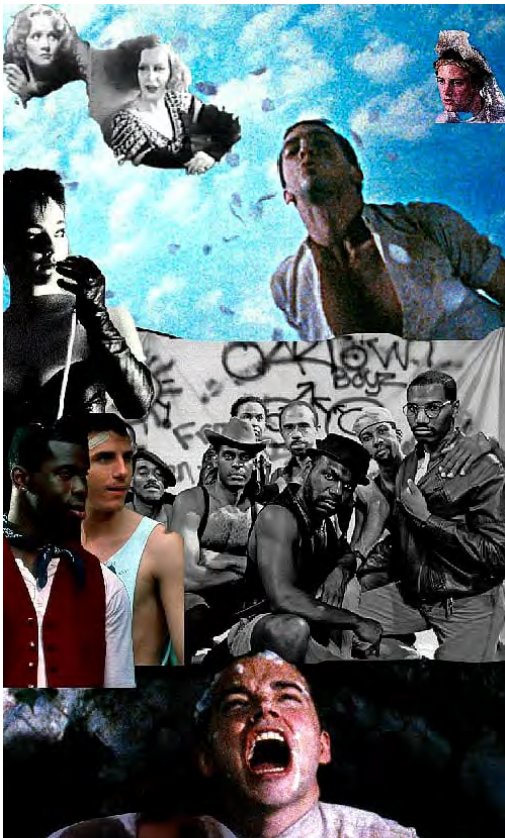


Fan-fiction is queering hetero/homo/normatives representations.

The essays in this special section also bear the burden of asking, “Can television be queer? What would that look like?” The range of issues raised within this collection emerge from observing new tendencies—especially the proliferation of LGBTQ+ characters on television—which increase the visibility and necessary debates surrounding the queerness of specific shows, series, personalities, characters, etc. This line of reasoning seems simultaneously progressive and regressive, as corporations regularly appropriate “subversive” representations for their profit-making potential (Himberg, 2018) by taming them and thus erasing their disruptive elements. From one standpoint, homonormative narratives shape what is understood as queer representation: we hope for inclusion, love, and diversity by portraying attractive narratives of successful queer love/life stories. By contrast, an alternative reading of non-LGBTQ+ narratives emerges as fan fiction is queering hetero/homo/normative representations. How can queer television’s usefulness to corporate media allow for increased production of LGBTQ+ representations? Can television hold space for complexity? Does TV drive social change, especially in terms of gender? Or, as Quinn Miller argues, does queerness lie outside a show’s dominant narrative (Miller, 2019)? Where might queerness be located in or beyond overtly LGBTQ+ content?

Queer film

The lines of genre between film and television are increasingly blurred, and with that, so too are the distinctions between different forms of media scholarship. However, film and film studies in particular have something to contribute to our discussion of queer television: in the ‘90s, New Queer Cinema (Rich 1992) offered an extensive and shifting, even malleable, way of thinking about queer events on screen. B. Ruby Rich identifies the birth of New Queer Cinema (NQC) at the intersection of four elements: the AIDS crisis, the Reagan era, camcorders, and cheap rent (Rich 2013, p. xvi). Almost 40 years later—that is, 40 years of globalization, neoliberalism and Trumpist political paranoia culminating in a global pandemic—we are galaxies away from queer cinema’s original media





environment or social context.

Today we find multitudes of explicit LGBTQ+ representation in the media since the inception of New Queer Cinema. B. Ruby Rich argues there is little relevance for such a term, since the genre itself has lost some of its edge. Rich writes: “[...] in truth, [NQC] had begun to shapeshift during the mid- to late 1990s into a launching pad for temporarily bankable movies to usher into the multiplexes (p. xxii)”. As Rich observes, the attraction to gay-related themes in cinema shifted exhibition away from counter-hegemonic productions and visibility. Even so, queer cinema still exists, but its “constellation” needs to be rethought. At the moment, we have a “being” of queer cinema (television and media). I’m suggesting that we could have a “doing” of queer cinema (television and media). Instead of interrogating what a film portrays, research informed by this approach could focus on how film interacts with the social, cultural, and political power relations around it. If we think of cinema now in terms of queer sensibilities, queer cinema enables a disruption, a subversion. It aims to break from a conventional representation of sexuality. It breaks up the dichotomy of gay/straight themes and (re)makes them its own. Queer cinema moves away from the dichotomy of being either “good” or “bad” for the community. Queer cinema embraces the harshness of being an outcast because of one’s sexuality, gender identity, or gender expression, or any combination of these.

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Classics of New Queer Cinema

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



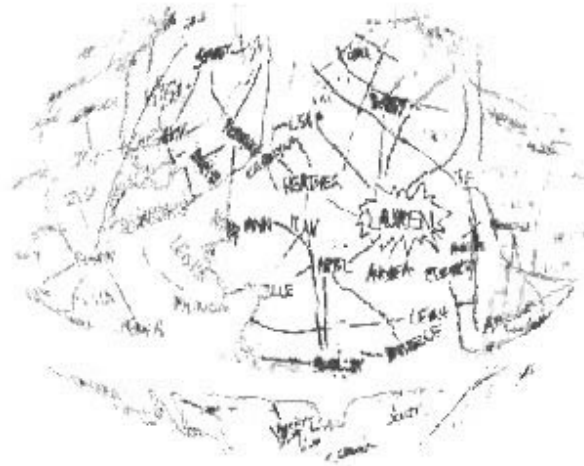
Random Acts of Flyness | Keep on kissing (if you can)

Queering everything here

“Queer TV” features a vast scope of disciplines, objects of study, research interests, and analytical methodologies. In putting all of this material together, I decided to imagine the layout of articles and book reviews like a map. I think of that mapping not so much in terms of discursive or epistemological delimitations, but as territories sharing common boundaries, even overlapping in some places. As I will explain below, this map draws links between the 19 articles, six book reviews, and two interviews that comprise the special section. I have grouped the papers according to seven lines of inquiry:

- *ambiguities*
- *trans-iting*
- *camp*
- *pedagogy*
- *reality TV*
- *politics*
- *film and television*

These categories demand the reader understands queerly. Categories create meaning and must be subverted in order to allow for these meanings to emerge fully.



The L Word's chart decentralised and twisted

Ambiguities

Our first cluster of articles explore the challenges and complexities of queer television. Mainly articulated around mainstream US productions, this subsection addresses issues of identity, identity politics, closeted identities, visibility, queerbaiting, boundaries, and of course, ambiguity. The authors of this subsection find intricacy in the spaces between the margins and the norm, between visibility and identity, between coming out and coming in. Ambiguity here aims to rest in an inter-binary positionality that enables us to rethink these poles, no longer taken as references in terms of identity, but as possible fluctuations of binary tensions which point to new possibilities. What might emerge if we rest in the in-between? The section includes articles by Lynne Joyrich on *Batwoman*; Kinga Erzepki on *Billions*; Jordan Z. Adler on *Transparent*; Lauren Herold on the persona of Queen Latifah; Sarah E. S. Sinwell on *BoJack Horseman*, and finally a book review written by Christina Hodel on queerbaiting (Brennan, 2019). Ambiguities share a territoriality with the following subsection, “trans-iting”, and as such, I locate ambiguities as a compass for our queer sensibilities.

Trans-iting

I titled this section “trans-iting” because I want to underscore that transness (and studies around it) is constantly in motion. Trans isn’t only an identity, a concept, or a point of activism; articles about trans characters, films, and television productions are found throughout the entire special section, as transness itself moves across landscapes, and permeates borders, shapeshifts. This subsection specifically refers to transition through the lenses of TV studies, literature studies, film studies, video games studies, fan studies, trans perspectives, trans utopias, trans-normativities, non-disclosure, trans children and so on. “Trans-iting” begins with an interview I conducted with Jack Halberstam on Queer Television, seriality, and queer and trans representation. The subsection also includes Deborah Shaw and Rob Stone’s paper on *Sense8*; Toni Pape on stealth gameplay; Mary Zabroskis on *I Am Jazz*, and Beck Banks’ book review on queer and trans struggle and the need for the “ordinary” (Cavalcante 2018).



A meta-framing TV show | *Random Acts of Flynes*

Camp

Dear to queer and trans communities, camp plays a major role within queer sensibilities. Here, we analyze manifestations of camp in documentary and on mainstream TV. With a historical perspective on such representations, “Camp” discusses questions of archives, in/visibility, and the mise en scène of camp characters. Sid Cunningham’s work on *Disclosure* offers a camp perspective on trans media. The author engages the ambiguity between distorted binary positions and offers a reconciliation between the pain and pleasure suggested by mainstream visual representations. Katharine Mussellam reviews Quinn Miller’s groundbreaking book, *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Television History* (2019), and Astrid Fellner takes a camp Latinx perspective on *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time*.

Pedagogy

Many queer kids, myself included, learned about their queerness through television. Television teaches us through its display of underrepresented subjects and themes, but also through an exploration of various possible identities. Alexis Poirier-Saumure considers Ava Laure Parsemain's *The Pedagogy of Queer TV* (a theoretical text referenced throughout this collection) to reveal how television both succeeds and fails to be a nuanced queer teacher, changing our relation to ourselves in the process. In looking at *Sex Education* and *Schitt's Creek*, Tanya Horeck finds that both shows encourage a pedagogical responsibility within mainstream television. And finally, three filmmakers—Beck Banks, Miche Dreiling, and myself—discuss queer/trans filmmaking as a form of pedagogical engagement. Pedagogy gives us a real-life takeaway from mediatic forms of representation.



Unknown

“Try to watch *Disclosure* without sound nor subtitles” | Unknown



Sex Education |
Lesson 1..... Anal douching
Lesson 2..... Fluidity and asexuality

Reality TV

So far, most of the work referenced focuses on explicitly fictional queer representations. By contrast, reality TV occupies a unique historical position when it comes to queer television, as it challenges some of the boundaries traditionally separating media and spectators. Sean Donovan (*Ru Paul's Drag Race*) and Philippa Orme (*Are You the One*) both explore current reality TV productions in their papers which study the intricate and delicate relations between a show, its audience, and their strange mainstream/counter-mainstream, ambivalent *liaisons*. The authors ask, what utopic possibilities appear in the disruption of queer identities as staged through reality TV?

Politics

Debates rage as to whether queerness is always political, and two papers in particular embrace this question head-on. Grace Jung discusses homophobia, policies, and discrimination in South Korea through the lens of the show *Ask Us Anything*. In the Canadian context, Ryan Conrad explores the importance of archives when it comes to queer histories, AIDS, and media productions by revisiting the *Toronto Living with AIDS* cable access project through detailed archival work.

Film & TV

As demonstrated earlier, film and television are queerly related. Film and television feed off one another; rather than being opposed, they represent a continuity of ideas and sensibilities. This subsection features two papers, one by Yaghma Kaby and the other by Patrick Woodstock, which look at continuities vis-à-vis *Hannibal* and its adaptation from book to film to television. *Hannibal* is a key text for discussion because it moves across numerous media platforms, and in this iteration, transforms from a homophobic and transphobic text in the hands of a queer fan (in this case, its showrunner, Bryan Fuller).



Danny and Karl meeting on the virtual reality game *Striking Vipers X* to have sex with each other | *Black Mirror*

In the same subsection, Nicole Morse and Lauren Herold discuss Mulvey's "male gaze" in relation to a possible "female" or "trans" gaze by summoning Jack Halberstam, Joey Soloway, Todd Haynes, Barry Jenkins, and the popular sci-fi series *Black Mirror*. Also deeply rooted in a film theory tradition, Yaghma Kaby offers a book review on horror and television from the 1950s to the present in relation to psychoanalytic film theory, as well as gender- and class-based film theory. Teresa Caprioglio gives a detailed analysis of *Veronica Mars* and the series' regendering of film noir in its television adaptation. And finally, Jenée



Wilde explores the paradox of science fiction, film, queer representation, the transgender “look”, and intersex individuals by concentrating on the film *Predestination* (Spierig and Spierig 2014).

“Yeah, but we also want them to fuck!”

You might notice that there is barely any mention of sex in this collection. Absent from these multiple, varied, and highly nuanced texts is an extended discussion of sexuality. I find this to be an egregious act when working with queer theory.

Given that the authors of all of the submissions I received are so hyperaware of the explosion of LGBTQ+ representation in the media, I was initially surprised and dismayed that not one of the pieces tackled the flourishing evidence of traces of queer sexuality on television. But then I began to realize that this silence is rife with possibilities for analysis. I would like to offer some of my own thoughts on this subject.

As Jane Arthurs states, tradition centers television at the heart of the household, and television, in turn, centers tradition:

“Explicit representations of heterosexual activity, or even the mention



Queer kiss failure because of an ex boyfriend's ghost | *The Haunting of Bly Manor*

of other more 'deviant' sexual behaviors, were unthinkable for a medium that transmitted the core values of the society from the public domain into the private sphere of the family home." (Arthurs, 2004: 2)

At the same time, representation and visibility of sexuality transform the televisual apparatus in multiple ways, from sex scandals to pornography. They also transform queer publics.

Alongside the rise of LGBTQ+ visibility, there has been a concurrent rise of homophobic, transphobic and misogynistic hatred. Visibility is not value-neutral, nor free from the structures that govern our current realities, and television is no exception. Of course, this is not to imply that increased representation is not important, nor is it the cause of this increased violence. As many queers would probably attest, representation on television can be a lifeline, but the sad reality is that it can also result in death threats (some of these ideas are discussed in this collection, see Banks, Dreiling and Rouleau).

Our political climate contributes to this tension. On the one hand, fierce conservatives rail against what they call "liberal suppression", claiming that queer and gender studies are not real studies, but a leftwing ideology that censors the expression of real (read: white) men and women. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, a stratagem for neoliberalism better known as "pinkwashing" begets the token incorporation of LGBTQ+ signifiers, but also represses any meaningful discussion of queer sexuality—even as it allows for better inclusion of queer people in the workplace, schools, and possibly family life (at least in North American social life). These two seemingly disparate political stances ultimately make the same argument: queer sex shouldn't be televised.

For example, the #MeToo movement was (and still is) a major development in the television, film, and video game industries, despite being co-opted from its roots in Black women's communities. It clearly demonstrates the sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia are deeply rooted in our media industries and representations. As Robin James notes in a discussion of Laura Mulvey's emblematic "Visual Pleasure",

"both in art and IRL [in real life], things like sexism, racism, ableism, all that—they hide behind habits and techniques of seeing / 'seeing'-as-metaphor-for-knowing that build a fourth wall. These habits and techniques make humanly constructed phenomena (like misogyny, sexist treatments of women characters, the tendency to kill off lesbian characters in TV shows, etc. etc.) appear as natural and true, as accurate reflections of how things really are. (James, 2016)"

In other words, how the industry functions is directly connected to the representations that are produced by/within it. By celebrating the expanded queer representations in mainstream media, we, as scholars, have fallen into a self-serving pattern of discourse. That is, by avoiding an extensive discussion of non-normative sexuality whilst celebrating a more "diverse" realm of representation, we give in to harmful conservative discourses about queer sexualities. If we are not talking about queer sex, not showing it on screen, not renewing shows that depict it, and not addressing it in its complexity, we are contributing to a cultural stalemate regarding sexual oppression. Our silence around the lack of representation of queer sexual expression becomes critical avoidance, the consequences of which include sexualized violence against queer and trans people.

What else is at stake with this absence of sex? What does this sanitization imply?

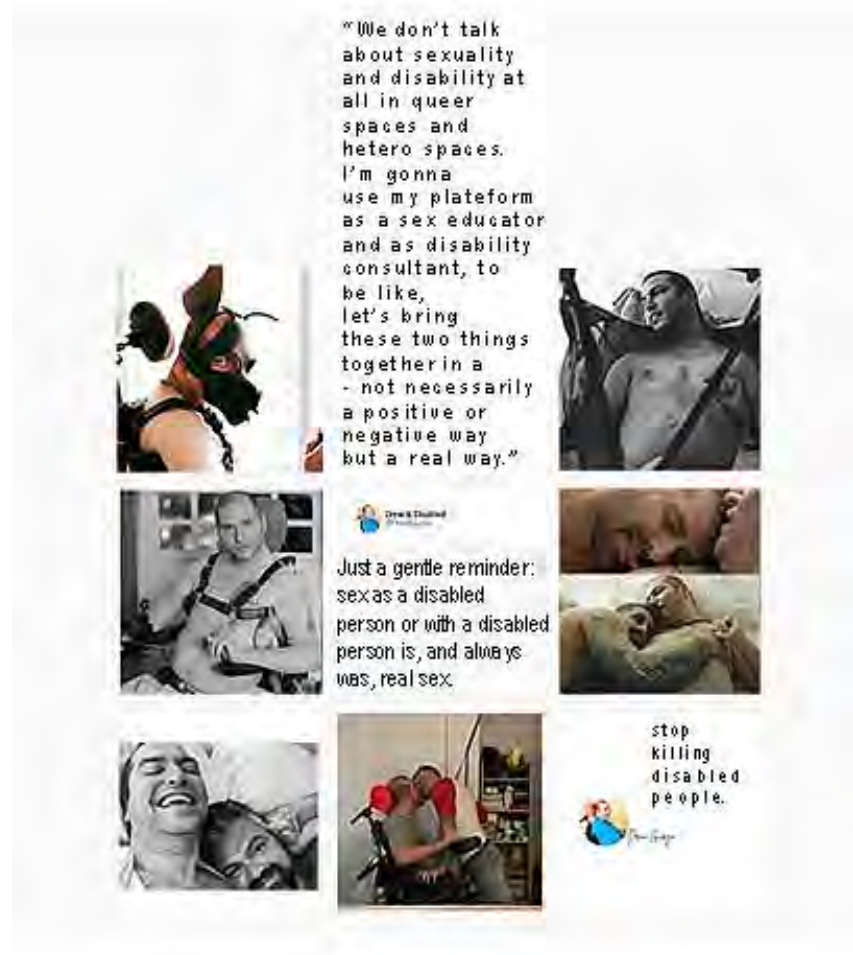
In their book *#NSFW, Sex, Humor, And Risk in Social Media*, Susanna Paasonen,



Tarana Burke | "Me too is a movement, not a moment."

Kylie Jarrett and Ben Light explore the regulation of sexuality within social media as hidden behind the hashtag *Not Safe for Work* (#NSFW). They argue that,

"This practice of conflating safety with the filtering of sexual content both builds on and bolsters an understanding of sex and sexuality as inherently risky, potentially harmful, and best hidden away and left unmentioned." (2019, p.10)



Pictures from Andrew Gurza's Instagram | Host of *Disability After Dark* podcast

In absenting sexuality within this special section, we too neutralize the "dangerousness" of queer sexuality. Let's not forget how the AIDS pandemic also reinforced a safety discourse surrounding queer sex[3]. [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) For years, society at large did not discuss sex and/as pleasure, that is sex as creative and imaginative, but instead portrayed it as dangerous, life-threatening, and contagious. We are witnessing a contemporary version of this view of sex as what Foucault calls the "repressive hypothesis" and its "perverse implantation" (1994). That is to say, we suppress sexuality within the discourse while concurrently creating a way to talk about it without actually talking about it.

Put bluntly, "queer" stripped of sex is a new form of puritanism. Too often we make an overly simplistic analogy wherein any non-heteronormative



ACT-UP, Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard,
Oliver Johnston, Charles Kreloff, Chris Li:
SILENCE = DEATH project | Colour
lithograph | 1987

representation is read as queer. What we fail to acknowledge as queer theorists of television is that this increased representation reproduces homonormativity when TV strives to present “queer” as safe and devoid of sex. This is also true of scholarship when we strip subversively queer sexual representation down to homonormative tropes in order to make queer sex seem safe, nice, and acceptable, even desirable to a voyeuristic straight eye. Regrettably, this special section is no exception.

To conclude, I’ve taken the liberty to open up this discussion in my introduction because the essays collected in this special section contribute to interrogating queer and television scholarships in so many ways. It is in this kind of theoretical space that we can challenge how we engage with queer sexuality on screen. As James mentions,

“Mulvey’s idea of the fourth wall and its role in film illustrates something that also happens in mainstream notions of politics, society, and government: when we focus just on individuals as they are in the present, we build a fourth wall that obscures histories and ongoing material practices/habits that shape reality in unequal, biased ways.”

By understanding and dismantling the fourth wall through a broader contextualization of where we come from, we will have a better idea of where we are now—and perhaps even a say in mapping out where we are going.

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Notes

1. I use this term willfully to put into question its pejorative use by conservatives to discredit leftist critiques of the lack of representation of diversity. I think it is undeniable that a form of “PC culture” exists. I don’t believe it’s rooted in activism. To me, it is a means for capitalist profits; an instrumentalization that glosses over issues of marginalization in order to pique public interest. I will expand on this further in my introduction. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. I am referring here to this hypervisibility of LGBTQ+ storylines and characters creating a sort of saturation: not of queer images flooding visual culture but of what they could be of instead. I argue that this hypervisibility creates a sort of invisibility regarding the complexity of queer identities.

3. The SILENCE = DEATH Project comes to mind (Finkelstein, Howard, Johnston, Kreloff, Lione, and Socarrás, 1987), and its visual is still a symbol of queerness today. [[return to page 2](#)]

Acknowledgements

Joëlle Rouleau is supported in part by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Thank you to all the authors, collaborators and reviewers who took this project to heart. Something is happening along these pages that will contribute to challenging, changing and queering scholarship on Television.

Thank you to my research assistants who have been engaging creatively with this special section. Map for the visuals of Lynne Joyrich’s, Jack Halberstam’s and mine’s papers, Juliette Blondeau, Joyce Cimper and Zakia Ahasniou for your research work. Thank you to my Queer Sensibilities cluster at Université de Montréal; your insight, enthusiasm and implication are very appreciated.

Thank you to Caroline Bem, Lynn Kozak and Alexis Poirier-Saumure who have been my sounding board along this road, and my first readers. Your support made this project see light.

Thank you to Kay Pettigrew for challenging me at the core with what all those gooey feelings could/should/would mean. Your professionalism and mastery of the English language gave me the missing little nudge on the final track.

Most of all, thank you to Julia Lesage for believing in this project, and offering me mentorship beyond my wildest dreams. You brought me further on my intellectual endeavor regarding queer theory and media studies than ever before. I will never be the same.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Batwoman jumping in without a mask.



Kate Kane | Batwoman



Beth Kane | Alice



Mary Hamilton | Mary in her secret illegal clinic



Luke Fox, the Wayne Enterprises employee | Engineer, investigator, security, and computer specialist in the Batcave

Bat signals and caped crusading: the ins and outs of the CW's *Batwoman*

by [Lynne Joyrich](#)

In October 2019, *Batwoman* premiered on the cable channel, The CW, featuring an out queer actor, Ruby Rose, playing out lesbian character, Kate Kane aka Batwoman—"the first lesbian superhero to headline her own series." [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Per the premise of the program, Kate decides to take on the mantle of "caped crusader" after her cousin Bruce Wayne has disappeared, abandoning the role of Batman and leaving Gotham City without the protection it so desperately needs. As suggested by this narrative device of a cousin swap, *Batwoman* is a superhero program that is also, at heart, a family melodrama, with the primary plots in its premiere season involving not simply crime-fighting but more so the miseries, masquerades, and misbehaviors (even criminal ones) that stem from Kate's family's complicated history and web of relations. These includes a traumatized and now villainous sister; another "good" version of that sister from a linked multi-verse; a tough father who treats Kate's ex-lover as almost more of a daughter than his own children even as he is tortured over what his family members have become; a second wife and her daughter, Kate's step-sister Mary, who longs to be close to Kate; a surrogate brother of the villainous sister; various lovers, exes, friends, associates, and partners-in-crime; and, constantly invoked if never seen, cousin Bruce Wayne/Batman himself. [2]

As all this implies, such a "super-melodrama" is well poised to take on questions of identity and difference, subjectivity and sociality, embodiment and enactment, self-knowledge and awareness (or lack of awareness) of others. After all, identity and its performances comprise a central concern not only of melodrama. The superhero genre has long been used, across comics, films, and television programs, to provide allegories for the challenges of identity-in-difference and difference-in-identity, deploying stories of masked heroes with alter-egos and secret identities to comment on political, racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and/or sexual formations that propel people into double lives—including, of course, the double life that can arise from being a closeted queer.

But that is not exactly Kate's problem. Living in a universe that seems oddly both more and less homophobic than our own, Kate is expelled from a military academy given her world's draconian "don't ask, don't tell" policy (whereas that policy was repealed in our world in 2011), yet she seems to face no other problems in being out. Rather, her problem is the imbrication of "out" and "in" that she cannot seem to escape, at least if she wants to save her city and all the people there she loves. In a kind of inversion of the usual "secret identity" trope, in which the superhero mask can stand in for other kinds of maskings (such as of sexuality), here sexual identity is invoked as a way to understand the tribulations and trade-offs of being a disguised savior.



Parker Torres | Terrier, the cyber hacker



"With one revelation of identity comes another riddle; one outing can yield another closeting, and 'being yourself' only happens within and across them."

The irony of this (or perhaps lack thereof, as inversion is precisely what both closet dynamics are all about) is made clear early in the series. The fourth episode, aptly titled "Who Are You?" (season 1, episode 4), [3] features Kate's voice-over as she expresses her thoughts about taking on the persona of "the bat," ostensibly musing to her absent cousin, Bruce Wayne (so, in effect, voicing these thoughts to herself), about the difficulties of being a superhero:

"I have never hidden who I am. I came out when Brad Morrison told all the kids at school that I was gay. I said "yeah, and?"; then punched him. Ever since then, I've been out and proud, as long as I can remember. So how the hell am I supposed to wake up every morning and hide who I am?"

After she vanquishes the villain-of-the-week as well as gets some clues about her villainess sister for that ongoing narrative arc, Kate returns to her voice-over at the end of the episode:

"Dear Bruce... Lies don't make anyone comfortable, especially the one telling them. But no one said anything about this job being comfortable. If I'm going to embrace the bat, then I'm going to have to embrace hiding a part of myself from the outside world. Living this double life is a sacrifice—but our city is worth it."

The titular question of "Who Are You?" is not as easily answerable as it seems, and struggling with it—not simply (or even primarily) for the self but for others—is apparently inevitable. It is also not simply a question for Kate, as the episode's various subplots involve mysteries and misperceptions surrounding the outer appearances and inner character of several others on the show, all of whom have "secret identities" in one way or another.

Rather than this program, celebrated for its out lead character, being beyond the closet then, it is only possible *through* it. The maskings and secret identities provide the very basis of the plots and make the characters worth televising. For they are both like us yet unlike us, familiar but with more enigmatic and exciting lives that we thus want to watch. Without that closet, yet also without it's being breached, there would be no show—or certainly no queer show. Indeed, it is precisely the mix of "in" and "out" in *Batwoman* that, according to one reviewer of this episode, marks "the critical difference between stories with queer characters & queer stories." [4] That is, the play with and between closeting and uncloseting allows the program to comment on queerness and to produce a narrative that is not a simple story but a multiply inflected and multiply positioned one. In that way, the program is like its lead, a multi-media character in a show with its own multi-verse, a superhero with no actual superpowers, a singular person with a double life, saving her city while struggling with her family, figured as "woman" and "bat," situated as "out" and "in."

We are not then, in any simple way, "beyond the closet"—even in a time period that has been called "post-closet," not to mention one that has also been called "post-television"—as those "posts" depend upon the very terms that they simultaneously revoke and invoke (that they can only revoke *by* invoking). This is certainly not to say that there are not important historical changes, both in sexuality (as it intersects with gender, race, class, region, nation, and so on) and in television (as it intersects with other media formations). I would, though, argue that what I have called, in prior work, the "epistemology of the console" (after, of course, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's brilliant work on the "epistemology of the closet") is still important to consider—perhaps now more than ever. [5] Television, contrary to dismissals of its continuing impact, is not something that can simply be shut away in those old closet-like consoles but is everywhere via broadcasting



"Who Are You?" Mediated Batwoman.

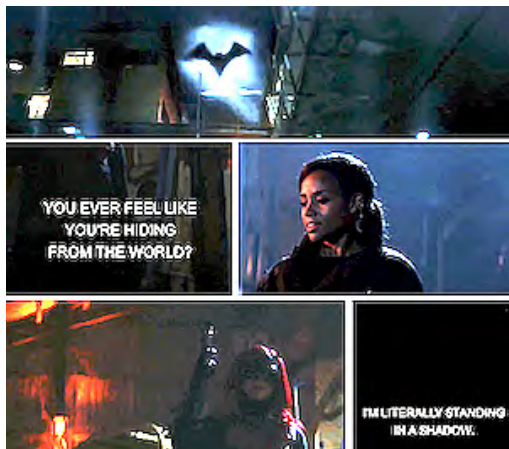
and streaming services, across network programming and digitally/televisually convergent offerings, with long form continuing stories and seconds-length video bits, on giant screens in public places and tiny screens we can wear on our wrists. It thus calls out to us like an ever-present bat signal, with pervasive televisual logics truly founding (and confounding) our very senses of subjectivity, sexuality, and sociality.[6]

As I elaborated in that prior work, TV's mix of founding and confounding paradoxically impels yet impedes unmaskings, visibilities, and "broadcastings." Indeed, even as it is demanded given television's displays and confessional discourses, [7] any simple sense of "full disclosure" on television of sexual identity and desire is nonetheless rendered impossible because of television's existence precisely at and across the borders of the categories by which we even think "sexuality," "identity," and "disclosure." TV both asserts yet blurs the boundaries of inside/outside, private/public, domestic/social, personal/political, solitary/shared, expected/extraordinary, revelation/mystery, pleasure/boredom, reality/fantasy. It's much like that bat signal—a beam of light and shadow, illuminating yet in the dark—or more precisely, only able to illuminate with and through darkness. Television thus produces its own shadows and blind spots along with its exposés and spectacles, which is why a politics simply of visibility, while generative in some ways, is inadequate to combating homophobia (and sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, etc.) in television.

Batwoman itself reflects upon the value yet limitations of a politics of visibility, showing the range of relations that may exist between media visibility/invisibility, knowledge/ignorance, and power/disempowerment. The self-reflexive episode "How Queer Everything Is Today!" (season 1, episode 10) [8] finds Batwoman "rescued" while trying to stop a run-away train (a rescue she does not really need) by a hunky, if publicity-seeking, Gotham City cop. The moment recreates the old melodramatic cliché of a woman being rescued off the train tracks, now immortalized for Gotham residents through numerous mobile camera images captured, in the show, by the people around them. These images make the Gotham City news. They are the subject of gossip spread by diegetic radio personality Vesper Fairchild, who encourages her audience to "ship" the heterosexual couple (i.e., to root, as fans, for a relationship between them). Not surprisingly, this does not please Kate Kane, who objects to her assistant Luke Fox that she's "very, very gay." But he reminds her that this gossip could be a good thing, keeping Gotham confused and thus helping to maintain the secret identity that is necessary for her work as Batwoman.



Undercover | On the cover.



Chiaroscuro identities.

Here, then, visibility is shown to operate against knowledge and power, with their mismatch giving Batwoman an advantage. Still, Kate struggles with this, not happy about what this kind of visibility implies both about her sexual identity and about her supposed need, or lack thereof as a superhero, to be rescued by a man. Sophie, Kate's ex-lover, is also struggling, both with her own sexual identity and presentation and with what she too has been driven to do in her role of fighting crime as a member of Kate's father's elite (and not always equitable or ethical) security force. While investigating the train incident, Batwoman happens upon her and offers to talk; Sophie, who doesn't recognize Batwoman as Kate (and who is forbidden by her boss, Kate's dad, from working with the vigilante Batwoman), asks, "You ever feel like you're hiding from the world?" to which Batwoman, describing their surroundings, quips, "I'm literally standing in a shadow." Sophie goes on to retort, "You're one to talk," to Batwoman's statement, "We all wear a mask. Maybe it's time you took yours off."

The dynamics of visibility and knowledge are again more complex here than one might expect. Batwoman is suggesting that Sophie come out. Indeed, Kate has wanted Sophie to come out of the closet since they were in the military academy together, when Kate did, and was expelled, and Sophie did not, thereby allowing her to complete the program, get the job with Kate's dad, and become a substitute daughter to him. But it is, indeed, only because Batwoman is masked and, in the mise-en-scene, cloaked in darkness (thus protecting both of their identities, their jobs, and their understanding of their relationships and histories) that Batwoman can make this suggestion.



Unnecessary rescue | Unsolicited romance: no damsel in distress on the train tracks.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



"We have nothing in common...." — Parker Torres.

Yet the time comes for Batwoman herself to take off the mask. She tracks down the culprit behind the out-of-control train, only to find a young female hacker named Parker (who was in control of the train all along, in a ploy to try to extort people in the city for money). Parker explains that she committed the crime because she was outed to her parents by an ex-girlfriend of her own (who told her that "being in the closet was prehistoric") and now needs money to move out. Parker claims her parents see her as a freak and want to disown her. Batwoman tries both to admonish and to empathize with her, but Parker will have none of it:

"My parents want me to be someone I'm not. Do you know how that feels? I hate myself, ok? And let's rain check your 'It Gets Better PSA.' We both know I'm going to grow up hiding my girlfriends and aspiring to be represented by an ancillary character on my favorite TV show. Just like you were probably the cool girl in high school, and now you're famous and everyone's shipping you with the hottest guy in Gotham. We have nothing in common.... So could you just leave me alone before I find more reasons to wish I was dead?"

Parker almost does wind up dead, but not by her own hand. Kate's traumatized and now evil sister, who goes by the name Alice (and who endlessly quotes the only book she was allowed to read when held prisoner as a child, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the text that provides the quote for this episode's title of "How Queer Everything is Today!" [9]) [[open endnotes in new window](#)] captures Parker so as to force her to use her hacking power to out Batwoman as Kate Kane to the whole city. This, Alice thinks, will put an end to Kate's do-gooding ways so that she'll instead join forces with Alice, who, in her own plea for family recognition, begs Kate just to accept her for who she is. Outings, then, cut both ways: causing family tensions for Parker but, Alice hopes, family togetherness for her and Kate. To save Parker, Kate does unmask (sparking contrition from Parker for lashing out against someone who turned out to be "super gay"). But Parker also tricks Alice, not sending the photo of an exposed Kate to the whole city as Alice believes but instead giving their location, prompting Sophie to arrive to save the day.

Batwoman too is a savior in the melee that ensues—in fact, rescuing the very cop who had "rescued" her from the train tracks earlier in the episode. But now when the watching crowd urges them to kiss, she refuses the "ship," telling him it's "not happening." The next thing we know, she's on the cover of the diegetic *Catco Magazine*, with the headline "Batwoman Reveals Herself AS A LESBIAN," earning a quip from Vesper Fairchild: "What ever happened to politics staying out of our superheroes?" That comment might be seen as particularly ironic and "meta" in its play with the terms of the real and the fictional, outings and closetings, given that Vesper is voiced by out lesbian and MSNBC host Rachel Maddow, known precisely for both her queer identity and her political commentary. Kate apologizes to her assistant Luke for what this might mean for the risks to their secrets, but he assures her that they'll "figure it out." Even happier with the situation is Parker, who says,

"You know, when you took off your mask, I never in a million years expected it to be you... someone like me. I'm glad it was."

In what ways, though, we might ask, is Kate "like" Parker? Kate is rich; Parker is



Outings and unmaskings cut both ways.



"In what ways, though, we might ask, is Kate 'like

desperate for money; Kate is a hero; Parker is a criminal (though, we presume, one on the way to redemption). Identity and difference are not such simple matters, particularly when the confusion and conflation around who someone "really" is (diegetically and extradiegetically, in regard to sexuality and in regard to power, enabling or preventing relationships, announced in media headlines or in intimate talks) is what forms the very basis of the show.

At the end of the episode, we are treated again to Kate's voice-over:

"We all wear a mask of some kind. A cowl, a husband, wife, denial, anger. We all need our shield to protect us from the world. But for people like us, it's not always about stopping a runaway train or disarming a bomb... Sometimes the best way to save someone is to be yourself. "

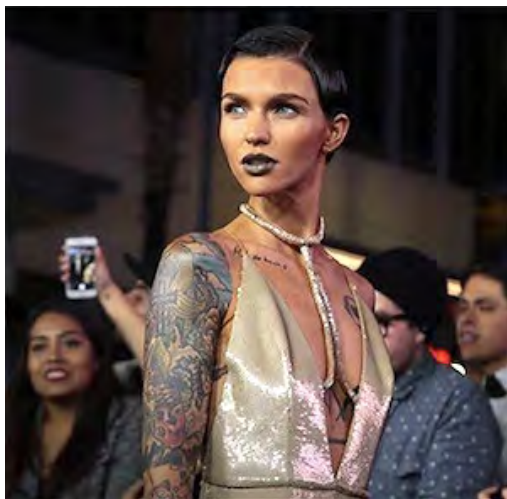
But who is this "self"? Over the voice-over, we see Kate's stepsister Mary, who longs for Kate to care about her as much as she cares about the lost-Beth-now-Alice. And then we see a grown-up Beth—not wearing the "Alice" get-up—who has unexpectedly entered Kate's home and talks as if there never was any trauma, any separation, any Alice persona. Kate forcibly grabs her. "Who are you? Who are you?" she shouts. "Me, Beth; who the hell else would I be?" Who else indeed?

As it turns out, she is Kate's sister from another dimension, where the events that damaged Beth, and turned her into Alice, did not happen. This uncanny doubling opens up what will be a new arc in the narrative and new complications to the questions of sameness and difference, identity and multiplicity, knowledge and recognition, inside and outside. But the question lingers (spilling over too from the title of the prior episode discussed, "Who Are You?"). With one revelation of identity comes another riddle. One outing can yield another closeting, and "being yourself" only happens within and across them. Media visibility—even as the lead, not (as Parker quipped) merely an ancillary character, in a mainstream TV show—may initiate possibilities. But this is only the beginning, not the end, of knowledge production, of relational possibilities, of questions of selfhood, and of complexities of politics—which, to Vesper's question, can never stay just in or just out.

Parker?"



Vester Fairchild | Rachel Maddow



"Rose was deemed by parts of the LGBTQ+ community to be, at once, both too expected and yet too miscast for the role... too queer in some ways, and yet not gay enough in others."

Vesper Fairchild, voiced by Rachel Maddow, is not the only figure for whom these issues resonate both "in" and "out" of the text, given the connections and/or contrasts between the people who play the characters and the characters themselves (many of whom are, within the diegesis, also playing even other characters). Indeed, television scholars have questioned the very limits of "inside" or "outside" of "the text." When it comes to television, meaning and knowledge production draw as much from extratextual, paratextual, and intertextual material as from intratextual formations.[10]

There was extratextual controversy when the production of *Batwoman* was announced, specifically around the season 1 casting of Ruby Rose as Kate Kane/Batwoman (before a recasting of the lead when Ruby Rose left the show after the first season). A young, photogenic, white Australian model-turned-actor who had defined herself, to the consternation of some, as both "genderfluid" and "lesbian," Rose was deemed by parts of the LGBTQ+ community to be, at once, both too expected and yet too miscast for the role. She was seen by some as too pretty and feminine looking, and so, though heavily tattooed, lacking the "butchness" one might want in a crime-fighter, yet not really a "woman" (because of that genderfluid identification) and so not able truly to qualify as a "lesbian." Hence, she seemed too mainstream and yet still too weird, too visible and yet not doing enough for visibility—in sum, too queer in some ways, and yet not gay enough in others.[11]



Ryan Wilder | The new Batwoman.



God Friended Me: Ali, played by Javicia Leslie (Ryan Wilder in *Batwoman*, 2021), with her girlfriend Deanna, played by Britne Oldford (Peek-a-Boo in *The Flash*, 2014).



Rose, whose tattoos include a cross with a reference to God, was also critiqued by some as an inappropriate choice for the role as she is not Jewish, as Kate Kane is written as being. This creates an interesting parallel given that her closet dynamics can also operate, if not in quite the same way, with ethno-religious identifications and differences, as Eve Sedgwick details in her reading of the Purim story of Queen Esther as a "coming out" as "one of those"—i.e., in that case, as a Jew.[12]

Tracing the demands and desires here can be dizzying: one must "really be" who they "play," even as that "playing" can valuably destabilize and thus queer "being" and "identity." One must "represent," even as they should alter conventional representation. One should appear, make oneself visible, and be seen, while not becoming defined by appearance or just framed to be seen. One should be clear, direct, unmistakable (i.e., unmediated) while bringing queerness to TV (i.e., being mediatized). But this dizziness, rather than impeding televisual knowledge, proliferates and multiplies it, revealing precisely the twists and turns of television's continuing if transforming "epistemology of the console" and the complications that arise in any simple attempt to crusade (caped or not) against it and to declare it over and out.

In May of 2020, it was announced that Ruby Rose herself was "out" [13]—that is, off of the program after just the first season, to be replaced by another actor playing another character who takes on the mantle of Batwoman, leading to concerns about what this meant for the program (how could not only the queer plots but the program as a whole continue if its lead departs?), for Kate's storyline (would she be just another "bury your gays" queerbaiting casualty? [14]), and for queer representation more broadly (what does this forebode for LGBTQ+ folks in television texts and in television production?).

There was thus great excitement—and relief—when, just a couple months later, another announcement arrived, specifying that the new Batwoman would be Ryan Wilder, a queer-of-color character to be played by Javicia Leslie. The casting announcement described Ryan Wilder/the new Batwoman as "likable, messy, a little goofy and untamed...[and] also nothing like Kate Kane, the woman who wore the Batsuit before her"[15]—while also assuring viewers that there would be one way in which Ryan *is* "like" Kate. Both are lesbians, and both are played by actors linked, in various ways, to queer stories and communities via previous roles (e.g., Leslie had played the lead character's lesbian sister on CBS's vaguely spiritual comedy-drama program *God Friended Me* [16]) and via "real life, with these links operating as modes of legitimation and authorization. In her statement about the new role, Leslie affirmed:

"I am extremely proud to be the first Black actress to play the iconic role of Batwoman on television, and as a bisexual woman, I am honored to join this groundbreaking show which has been such a trailblazer for the LGBTQ+ community." [17]

Yet such trailblazing is necessarily constrained by the very terms of media recognition (or misrecognition) that stories about masked superheroes often question. One critic exclaimed, "a Black queer Batwoman is the new normal," but that normality—television's taming of the "untamed" and straightening of the "messy"—operates as a double-edged sword (or double-edged Batarang).[18]

Equally double-edged is the position of a Black woman in a crime-fighting show—a genre that, to say the least, has been extremely problematic in terms of its treatments of race (as well as gender and sexuality). While Batwoman is a masked vigilante, not precisely a cop, one might still question the operations of crime fighting—as the program itself does to some degree. It calls out policing in its representations of the Gotham City police department as ineffective, and it

Javicia Leslie: The future of Batwoman.



Exploring the paradoxical politics of visibility.



Luke Fox (Camrus Johnson) searching for new horizons.

exposes the private security force, The Crows (led by Kate Kane's father as an alternative to the actual cops) as an excessive force-using, for-hire-for-the-rich, accountable-to-no-one, paramilitary operation. It therefore shows how the diegetic "justice" system is often biased, brutal, and unfair. Yet, in this milieu, a crime-fighting, law-and-order position for a Black woman—even as she takes over the role from a former white savior—is one that raises as many issues for assessing representation as it resolves, particularly in the light of ongoing histories of racist policing and vigilantism both on and off television. [19]

Thus, while the presence, acceptance, and visibility that *Batwoman* affords (to queers, to women, to African-Americans, and to other minoritized subjects) is significant, such presence and visibility aren't enough. They do not necessarily lead us out of the paradoxes, problems, and play; the conjunctions, contradictions and collisions; the demands, desires, and dilemmas constituted by the epistemology of the console. For these demands include many elements—that textual fictions and extratextual realities both align and alight; that the televised are both legitimated and let loose; that identities and enactments both equate and expand; that performer histories and performed stories are both grounded and groundbreaking; that televisual roles are both commended and commodified (so that we "buy" them as figures with whom we identify and in whom we invest even as they—and we—are sold). Indeed, the multiplicities and intersections of sexuality and race only underscore the twists of these logics and illogics. Negotiations over sameness and differences, reality and fantasy, closures and openings, diversification and normalization, policings and releasings, affective and financial economies become even more complex and critical to interrogate.

This complexity yields potentiality and peril. Television's ability to follow multiple, intersecting, and interacting characters, narratives, and even (as we see with *Batwoman*) multi-verses can open up imaginative possibilities to deal with the multiplicities and intersections that define our subjectivities, sexualities, and socialities. This happens even as the industry—with its knowledges and ignorances, orders and disorders, market rationalities and consumer/commodity calculations—may also occlude possibilities. But just as televisual il/logics can delimit, they may help us signal other options—like a bat signal calling out for new heroines and new horizons. It is only by looking out for such signals, and by thinking through those il/logics (rather than disavowing them), that we can best move ahead—to new seasons in TV, in queer and intersectional politics, and in social and cultural relations.

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Notes

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Joëlle Rouleau and Julia Lesage for all of their wonderful work for this Special Issue. A round of thanks to Joëlle Rouleau and Marta Boni who co-organized the *Queer Television* conference (held on May 9-11, 2019, in Montreal); [Map](#) for the images; and to Melissa Getreau and Julie Levin Russo for help with the captions.

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17. Javicia Leslie, cited in Joe Otterson, "'Batwoman' Casts Javicia Leslie as New Series Lead," *Variety*, July 8, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/batwoman-javicia-leslie-series-lead-ruby-rose-1234701651/>

18. Mel Perez, "With Javicia Leslie's Batwoman, My Favorite Character Is Finally Being Played by Someone Who Looks Like Me," *Autostraddle*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.autostraddle.com/with-javicia-leslies-batwoman-my-favorite-character-is-finally-being-played-by-someone-who-looks-like-me/>. For further commentary on the notion of "the new normal" and on the place of queer television in the mainstream, as well as the place of the mainstream in queer television studies (through, indeed, a discussion of the TV program titled *The New Normal*), see Lynne Joyrich, "Queer television studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main) Streams," *Cinema Journal* 53 (2), 2014, pp. 133-139.

19. For an interesting discussion of this, see Delia Harrington, "How Batwoman Takes on Policing and Social Issues," *Den of Geek*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/how-batwoman-takes-on-policing-and-social-issues/>. For a discussion of similar issues raised in the fascinating program *Watchmen* (also a story of masked identities and superheroes), see Aaron Bady, "Doctor Manhattan is a Cop: *Watchmen* and Franz Fanon," *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 31, 2019, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/dr-manhattan-cop-watchmen-frantz-fanon/>.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Billions Key Art (Showtime).



Asia Kate Dillon as Taylor Mason ("Dead Cat Bounce").

Introducing Taylor Mason: *Billions* and the first non-binary character in a mainstream U.S. television series

by [Kinga Erzepki](#)

Until 2017, the visibility of non-binary people in U.S. television was non-existent. While gender minorities called for more representation, in most media their presence remained largely unacknowledged. The first mainstream U.S. television series to feature a non-binary character was Showtime's *Billions* with the introduction of Taylor Mason in the second season (Boisvert; Dowling; GLAAD "Where We Are"). [\[open works cited in new window\]](#) In itself a turning point for non-binary visibility, this addition comes across as even more radical given the series' setting and conventions verging on a pastiche of Wall Street macho theatrics. To establish how the series positions a non-binary character within this context, I use close textual analysis to examine the first two episodes featuring Taylor Mason.

I begin by focusing on the formal elements and strategic order used to reveal information about the character. I also discuss the significance of their identity as a non-binary Millennial, considering both that generation's contempt for Wall Street and Wall Street's enduring "boys club" culture of exclusion. I then defend the borderline stereotype of Taylor's physical presentation by pointing to other aspects of that character's construction. Finally, I comment on the casting of Asia Kate Dillon as Taylor. Relevant reviews, recaps, and interviews support my analysis, as well as provide insight into how other critics interpret the character.

Taylor's exceptional abilities and privileged background may seem like predictable or even safe traits for a first non-binary character. However, I argue that Taylor's construction and introduction are a carefully controlled experiment aimed to challenge possible viewer prejudices and subvert typical Wall Street tropes. *Billions* presents the character as an exceptional individual qualified and suited for a high finance world—and then the script poses a question about how their gender and identity might be enough to exclude them from that world. Juxtaposing them against almost caricatured (or at least hyperreal) hedge fund traders and managers, *Billions* establishes Taylor as a new kind of Wall Street protagonist—one with professional merit but also a contrarian standpoint. Given the realities and demographics of the financial industry in the United States, the social implications may extend far beyond the fictional firm, Axe Capital. As a result, the introduction of Taylor Mason reads as a conscious critique of prior filmic representations of Wall Street and the culture these reflect.

First impressions



Billions Season 3 promotional image (Showtime).



Billions Season 2 promotional image (Showtime).



The first appearance of Taylor Mason (“Risk Management”).

In terms of plot, *Billions* focuses on the legal-turned-personal battle between two adversaries: Chuck Rhoads (Paul Giamatti), a New York District Attorney (still, in season 2), and Bobby “Axe” Axelrod (Damien Lewis), a billionaire hedge fund manager. Brian Koppelman and David Levien have co-created and produced the series with Andrew Ross Sorkin, and the writing duo continues to serve as the showrunners (Otterson). After gathering positive reviews, *Billions* has quickly become one of Showtime’s top series (Greene) and its sixth season is now in production (White).

Taylor Mason, portrayed by non-binary actor Asia Kate Dillon, joins *Billions* in the premiere episode of season 2, but their introduction is extended across two episodes, with the first one serving only as a sneak-peak into the character’s identity and role. During their initial appearance, there is no reference to the character’s name, pronouns, or gender. Such a setup introduces Taylor to viewers bypassing any prejudice against non-binary people. Traditionally, introductory scenes provide an audience with the character’s essential traits (Bordwell and Thompson; Pearson) and a “manual” for their interpretation (Elsaesser and Buckland); here Koppelman and Levien make a statement that Taylor’s gender is of secondary importance to the plot and does not constitute the character’s essence. Instead, the scene highlights other aspects of their identity that set them apart from the financial crowd at Axe Cap, and indicates Taylor’s professional skills that will completely change the balance of power in the series’ central conflict.

The scene creates an impression that Taylor is a seasoned employee of Axe Capital whom Mafee (Dan Soder) would consult on a difficult trade. The revelation that Taylor is in fact his intern comes as a surprise. As Sarah Caldwell points out: “Mafee gets schooled by his intern Taylor who shows him how to save 10 million dollars.” Thus, from the very first scene, Taylor is established as an exceptional strategist, clearly more knowledgeable than one of Axe’s most trusted employees. “It’s not a fluke. It’s efficiency. It’s you,” comments Mafee on the financial gains made during Taylor’s internship (“Risk Management” 35:16). This key information about Taylor comes from *the speech of others* (Butler), a character the audience is already familiar with, rather than directly from the newcomer. Furthermore, it is the “goofball” Mafee (Caldwell)—one of the most likable traders in the series (Nussbaum)—who introduces the new character to the viewers. Thus, from the start, the script indicates that Taylor is already recognized among Axe Cap co-workers specifically for expertise.

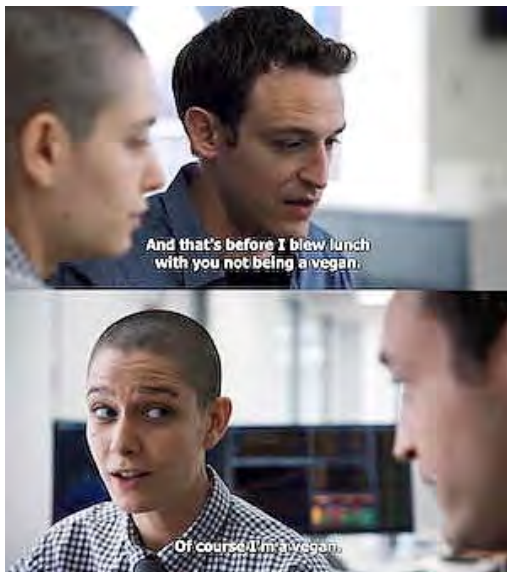


The establishing shot of Taylor’s introduction (“Risk Management”).



Taylor introduced through the words of Mafee (“Risk Management”).

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Of course they are vegan. Among other things ("Risk Management").

The introduction is carefully constructed so as not immediately to give away that this is a key character. Not even its timing in the episode would suggest the incident's importance; rather than at the beginning or ending, the moment occurs just past the mid-point ("Risk Management" 33:25). The scene does not appear to reveal any significant information or detail, other than some trouble Mafee might be in. However, the mise en scène makes it clear that the main focus here is Taylor, not Mafee. The scene opens with an establishing shot with Taylor in the center of the frame, while the comic relief character is moved to the side.

After showing Taylor's analytical skills, the introduction moves into a somewhat awkward conversation about Taylor's presumed veganism:

Mafee: This is why I need to keep you when your internship's over.

Taylor: Yes. I'd believe the same thing if I were you.

Mafee: Oh. I ordered you lunch. Vegan.

Taylor: What makes you think I'm a vegan?

Mafee: I don't know... *Everything? All of it?*

Taylor: [sigh]

Mafee: Fuck! You're not?!

Taylor: [annoyed] I'll eat it.

Mafee: [distracted] Look, I've eliminated slippage since you've got here. My trade-cost analysis is up 150 bips. And that's before the 10-ball you just saved me. It's not a fluke. It's efficiency. It's you. And now you're leaving. I can't afford that. I'll die off. And that's before I blew lunch with you not being a vegan.

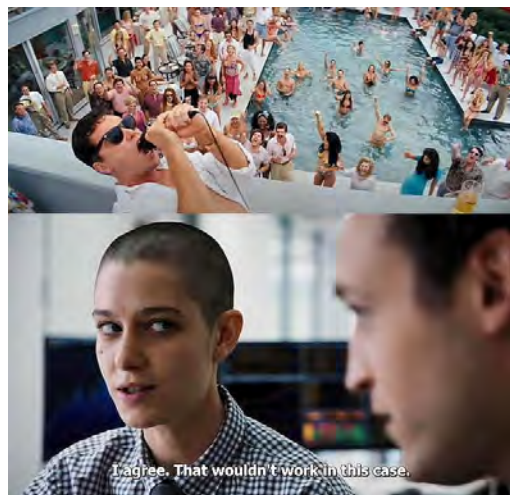
Taylor: [smiling] *Of course I'm a vegan.*" (emphasis added, "Risk Management 34:43)

As viewers will find out later, this seemingly random exchange establishes Taylor's crucial traits which may serve as the "manual" (Elsaesser and Buckland 17) setting up our interpretation of the character. In this sense, starting from the introductory scene, Koppelman and Levien use (stereo)typical Millennial qualities as a form of *social typing* (Dyer, "Stereotyping"). That is, as Josh Tickell described them, Millennials may be a "revolution generation"—one that has brought to the mainstream ideals previously disregarded in the United States. Among those ideals are notions of gender as a spectrum, veganism, social justice, and environmentalism (Risman, Meager; Rowland; Tickell). As the young empathetic, progressive, socially conscious, tech-savvy, and non-binary vegan, Taylor's character practically embodies the Millennial archetype.

The various convictions associated with the Millennial type are revealed gradually



Axe contemplating the incoming changes following his first meeting with Taylor ("Dead Cat Bounce").



Taylor vs. the typical Wall Street incentives (here, *The Wolf of Wall Street*).

throughout the season and beyond, but here a correctly presumed veganism becomes the first indication Taylor will represent a contrarian standpoint at Axe Cap. From the very beginning, these qualities not only mark Taylor as a member (or emblem) of their generation, but also distinguish them from other characters in *Billions* who are not only older but usually express opposite views. The welcoming of this non-binary Millennial indicates a change at Axe Capital, which is a theme recurring throughout season 2.

Though Taylor is perfectly comfortable in their identity, they are also aware—judging by their reaction to Mafee's order and later conversations with Axe—how others often perceived them and make such quick assumptions based on their age, gender, and appearance. As Willmore writes,

"Taylor's experience is by no means easier than that of the women on the show . . . but it's different, in that so many of their colleagues are confounded about what biases to bring to bear. No one at work has context for Taylor."

However, any reservations become of little significance, as co-workers realize Taylor's skills. This is also precisely where the brilliance of this introductory scene lies. Whatever preconceived notions some viewers might have against Taylor and non-binary genders, they cannot deny the character's expertise as a hedge fund analyst.

In terms of dialogue, the digression about lunch serves as perfect segue from a jargon-heavy conversation to a less formal one about the character's value to Axe Cap and personal priorities. "Taylor's introductory scene is particularly sharply done," praises James Hibberd, as it provides an overview of the character's core motivation and morals without unnecessary exposition. It also establishes a friendship between the two characters that will prove crucial both to Taylor's arc and the show's central plot (Nicolaou). Mafee is desperate to keep Taylor at the company after the internship is over:

"Mafee: Here's my problem. The shit that I do to keep most people after an internship ... throwing money around, showing them a good time ... none of that's gonna work on you.
Taylor: You mean like hot girls showing up at my place and drink till I puke and all that? I agree. That wouldn't work in this case.
Mafee: So how do I keep you?
Taylor: You kind of can't." ("Risk Management" 35:35)

From this short exchange, *Billions* immediately establishes Taylor as a counterpoint—a character who subscribes to the same professional goals and even methods of attaining them (B. Kessler), but not the same personal



The introduction of Denise Bryson ("Masked

aspirations, nor the theatrics embraced by many wannabe traders in the real-life Wall Street (Polk in White, Maclean), its *Billions* representation (Hess), as well as many previous cinematic depictions (Boozer, Benke, Salek).

Even the very first line addressed at Taylor: "Thanks for working through lunch" indicates their much different disposition and work ethics, especially contrasted with the preceding scene when Wags (David Costabile) mocks the analysts for their "dog shit" ideas and lack of any "cocksucker" strategies (33:42). Taylor and Wags' roles at Axe Cap differ significantly, but the sequence further accentuates the intern's greater competence. Thus, before Taylor's gender or pronouns are ever mentioned, the character is already presented to the audience as a potential MVP with unshaken confidence, impressive skillset, and strong moral compass, all of which command respect. Immediately, they are established as a character of great potential who happens to be non-binary, rather than one whose gender would shape the core of their story arc.

Pronouns

It is only the second episode that officially introduces Taylor ("Dead Cat Bounce" 09:17). The series also takes this opportunity to immediately address the use of gender-neutral, singular pronoun "they"—a topic as important for many non-binary people, as resented by those unfamiliar with it (Dembroff and Wodak; Retta and Burke; Wynn). As Taylor approaches Axe's office, their face is not showing, only the back of their head. However, considering the characteristic haircut, the viewers might already recognize them from the previous episode. The moment they step into the room, as the camera faces them, Taylor introduces themselves and states their pronouns. Axe simply acknowledges, replies "okay," and the two proceed to discuss the strategy Taylor devised ("Dead Cat Bounce" 09:17).

It is worth to consider how introduction of Taylor and their pronouns is reminiscent of a scene from the infamous second season of *Twin Peaks*. There, in "Masked Ball," special agent Dale Cooper expects the arrival of his long-time friend "Dennis" Bryson, whom he describes as "the finest mind of the DEA." Much like Taylor then, this character is also introduced to the viewers and other characters as highly-skilled before even arriving on scene. Moreover, in each series, both characters are initially announced as men.

In *Billions*, when Mafee describes the strategy "his analyst" proposed, Axe orders "to bring *him* in," assuming the likely gender due to the company's demographics, since he has never met Taylor before (emphasis added; "Dead Cat Bounce" 09:06). In *Twin Peaks*, neither Cooper, nor Sheriff Harry S. Truman know about Bryson's transition, so the latter tells the receptionist to "send *him* right in" (emphasis added; 16:39). When the character walks in, she presents feminine, declares that "[she] now goes by Denise" and uses female pronouns. Just like Axelrod, Cooper simply replies, "Okay"—"not 'Wow!' or 'Huh?'" but a prosaic, matter-of-fact 'OK'" (Allen)—and from that moment addresses Denise by the correct name and pronouns. However, as Denise leaves, Deputy Hawk comments: "That's a good color for *him* [sic]" ("Masked Ball" 18:16); thus, "misgendering [Denise] and giving the audience tacit permission to laugh at the character—especially because the line follows a deliberately long beat" (Allen).

"Plots that turn on switched identities and disguised passing have been comic staples since the Greeks," and those featuring gender transgressions proved to be equally popular with contemporary U.S. audiences. In this vein, *Some Like It Hot*,

Ball").



Taylor's official introduction ("Dead Cat Bounce").

Victor/Victoria, *The Birdcage*, *Tootsie*, and *Mrs. Doubfire* all reached and continue to hold their status of genre classics ("AFI's 100 Years"; "The 50"; "Hollywood's"; "Readers"). However, considering that their protagonists disguise themselves belonging to another gender to hide their true identity, all these films tend to be considered as "cross-dressing" farce, rather than as depicting a transgender experience (Cardullo; J.R. Miller; Lieberfeld and Sanders).

This is not the case with Denise in *Twin Peaks* who feels more authentic presenting feminine (Kruger-Robbins). Regardless of that, the character receives a similar comedic treatment, as the topic of her gender becomes a "wink wink" type of gag between the series and its viewers. Whereas with the former films I mentioned, the audience is in on the dramatic irony and laughs *with* the male protagonists successfully tricking others (Feder; Harris-Moore), such positioning in *Twin Peaks* reads more *at* Denise and the unabashedly transphobic jeer (Allen; Fradley and Riley). Consequently, her introduction falls into a typical late 80s-early 90s style of LGBTQ+ representation that seemingly had to feature a queer-phobic dig in some capacity (Becker; M. Miller). Still, watching the scene now, it is no less jarring to me that the character used to misgender Denise is Deputy Hawk—possibly the most competent, moral, kind-hearted character in the series, and one universally beloved by its fans (Collins; Roffman et al.; Wigler). Yet, Axe is equally popular among *Billions* viewers (though for much different reasons).



Misgendering in *Billions* ("Dead Cat Bounce") vs. *Twin Peaks* ("Masked Ball").

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Axe cuts short another attempt to degrade Taylor ("Optimal Play").

Especially since 2010s, overt and covert mockery that predominated in the mainstream is (fortunately) becoming a thing of the past with more productions instead aiming for "a respectful representation of queerness that acknowledges otherness without exaggerating or demonising it." As a result, as Ave Laure Parsemain argues, many quality television series take on more of a pedagogical role, "[inviting the viewers] to familiarize themselves with LGBT+ identities and to learn about issues like homophobia, transphobia, discrimination and intersectional oppression . . . affecting LGBT+ people" (241). [\[open works cited in new window\]](#) This is also the approach *Billions* adopts.

Similarly to Denise, Taylor is also misgendered in the introductory episode—twice: First, as a "he," when Axe presumes the brilliant analyst will be a man; second, as a "she," when Dollar Bill (Kevin AuCoin) tries to devalue their idea. The latter moment also reads as a sexist attempt to further undermined them, regardless of whether the trader incorrectly assumes they are a woman or fails to acknowledge their actual gender. In some way, the misgenderings of Taylor (especially Dollar Bill's) feel unnecessary and completely avoidable. Yet, by incorporating such misgenderings in Taylor's introduction, *Billions* manages to make early on a clear statement that the character is neither a "he," nor a "she." Simultaneously, the series acknowledges that declaring gender neutral pronouns is rarely met with an immediately positive and respectful response from all (Herman et al.; Iantafii and Barker). Most important however, unlike in *Twin Peaks*, the scene in *Billions* does not carry such comedic undertones. Axe not only accepts Taylor's pronouns without hesitation, but also does not allow for misgendering by other employees or close friends—as in the confrontation a non-binary viewer describes as "an alpha male showdown over a nonbinary person's pronouns" (Cassolotl). In "Optimal Play," Dollar Bill seems eager to make a derogatory remark about Taylor again, but at that point Axe's sharp exclamation is enough to deflate him.

Significant here is also the difference between those who knowingly (?) misgender the two transgender characters. Dollar Bill is not the caring and lovable type like *Twin Peaks*' Deputy Hawk but rather his opposite—possibly the most arrogant, corrupt, sly, crass, and money-hungry insider-trading aficionado, a person who rejoices when a crewed spacecraft explodes because he shorted that company's stock ("Hell of a Ride"), and a character "obviously symbolic of . . . capitalism at its worse" (Duralde and Mankiewicz 02:20). Dollar Bill's final acceptance of Taylor and recognition of their pronouns by the end of the season form a separate subplot for the two characters. This arc suggests, maybe for the first time, that he might not be hopelessly corrupt and thus the script demonstrates that even alpha Wall Street males are capable of respecting other people's pronouns, if only after a little push from the top.



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| Even Dollar Bill finally gets there ("Golden Frog Time"). | As Dillon emphasizes: "The burden of explanation should not be on the oppressed" (qtd in M. Kessler; "The Kingmaker"). |



Old money vs. New money ("The Kingmaker").



The scenes in *Billions* and *Twin Peaks* begin in a similar way and introduce Taylor and Denise almost identically. Yet, Koppelman and Levien "[incorporate] Taylor's gender unquestioningly" (Rosner) and immediately proceed to foreground the character's abilities. Meanwhile, Denise's gender identity and her accomplishments become diminished for a cheap laugh.

The "casual transphobia" of *Twin Peaks*' could be written off as an antic of the era—in combination with a desperate attempt to quirk up the series after David Lynch's departure (Allen). In contrast, *Billions* takes a different approach with its most beloved character. While his corrupted adversary "flaunts his pedigree," Axe "embodies the American dream." He is "the man of the people" (Willmore) and "the show's signature attraction" (Nussbaum). In a poll on the series' official Twitter account, only 24% of the viewers declared themselves as #TeamChuck, while the overwhelming 76% side with #TeamAxe (@sho_billions). Nussbaum believes that for the majority of the audience "it's much harder to fantasize about Chuck . . . because he is too grumpy, too tormented, to be our avatar." Meanwhile, Axelrod's "need for control is what we identify with and get off on." Through Axe's support of Taylor and their pronouns, the self-made (if fraudulent) billionaire models gender-inclusive behavior, especially for those who find the character fascinating or even inspirational. It is the beloved Axe, the "swashbuckler . . . larger-than-life guy we might daydream about becoming" (Wiegand) who personally approaches Taylor and takes them under his wing; not Chuck, whom many viewers detest and interpret as symbolic of a corrupt U.S. government (Wiegand; LorenzoValla; Macimich; Mazerilil; NotasSpecial). In season 2, rooting for Axe means rooting for Taylor as well, if only by association.

Taylor's professional ambitions and loyalties to the hedge fund are key also in terms of their typing and development. We might expect that this "active in Occupy Wall Street" non-binary character whose "politics run pretty far left" ("With or Without You" 16:39) would join the righteous (in theory at least) side of the *Billions* conflict and act with the law on their side. However, the series avoids this clichéd *narrative function* and consequently *stereotypical character construction* (Dyer, "Stereotyping"). In this case, Taylor, the progressive,

By association ("The Kingmaker").

transgender Millennial does not work for the Department of Justice fighting insider trading, but rather for the very industry the generation despises so much (Atkins; Finocchiaro; Richter; Winograd and Hais). Thus, the series plays here both with the viewers' sympathies, as well as their expectations of the *social type* it first constructs (Dyer, "Stereotyping").

Millennial on Wall Street

Many fictional depictions of Wall Street border on pastiche but the audiences often miss this subtlety and perceive characters such as Gordon Gekko or Jordan Belford as aspirational figures instead of caricatures (Boozer; Benke; Salek; Winter). *Billions* also follows this convention—it alludes to the Wall Street ethos but whether it glorifies it or not remains a matter of interpretation. According to Steve Matoren,

"the fictional *Billions* world . . . either replicates or satirizes, *depending on your perspective*, the ultra-competitive, Oliver Stone 'greed is good' mentality of multi-billion-dollar hedge fund traders" (emphasis added).



In many ways, Axe Capital characters are exactly like most other Wall Street protagonists ("The Kingmaker") but ... they also go to therapy and respect one's pronouns ("The Kingmaker," "Dead Cat Bounce").

Meanwhile, Jim Tankersley argues that *Billions* "is a departure from how Hollywood, and classic literature before that, has long caricatured the banker villain." *Billions* might have an advantage over productions such as *Wall Street* or *Big Short* in the way the script develops calculated yet straightforward breaks with older conventions, without ever becoming preachy. Possibly the best example of it is the series' stance on psychotherapy and reasons to use it. All major Axe Cap characters are regularly shown benefiting from therapy, both in their professional and personal lives. The "alpha male showdown, over a nonbinary person's pronouns" (Cassolotl) after Dollar Bill misgenders Taylor may be another such defiance of expectations. Thus, at first glance, the characters in *Billions* fit those familiar tropes of "alpha males" and "frat boys." Yet, with such relatively small but fundamental changes, the series manages to subvert the "tough guy" stereotype at its very foundation, showing a more humane, considerate, and vulnerable version of the Wall Street trader figure. Due to this idiosyncratic blend of social commentary and over-the-top characters, *Billions* emerges, somewhat

surprisingly, as the “sharpest critique of toxic masculinity” (Willmore) and “the smartest stupid show” on television (Hess).



Taylor's background is not all that different from their co-workers (“Currency”).

The characterization of Taylor follows the very same principle of being constructed on a small yet fundamental change to traditional typing. Taylor is a near perfect prodigy made for the world depicted in *Billions*: they are exceptionally talented, efficient, and from a similar social position as most of their peers, or more specifically: “white, thin, young, wealthy, able-bodied, and masculine-presenting,” as Cassolotl describes them. In this way, Taylor resembles another pioneering character—Maura from *Transparent* whose “privileged background . . . is not an adequate representative of the transgender and queer community” (Parsemain 210). Yet, in the case of *Billions*, perhaps Taylor does correspond to those on the trading floor at Axe Cap, as well as those working in many real-life hedge funds (Rew et al.). Even Dillon admits that

“if Taylor had been assigned male at birth, a person of color, and wore dresses to the office . . . *in a world like Billions [it] would have been more jarring to people*” (emphasis added; qtd. in B. Kesslen).

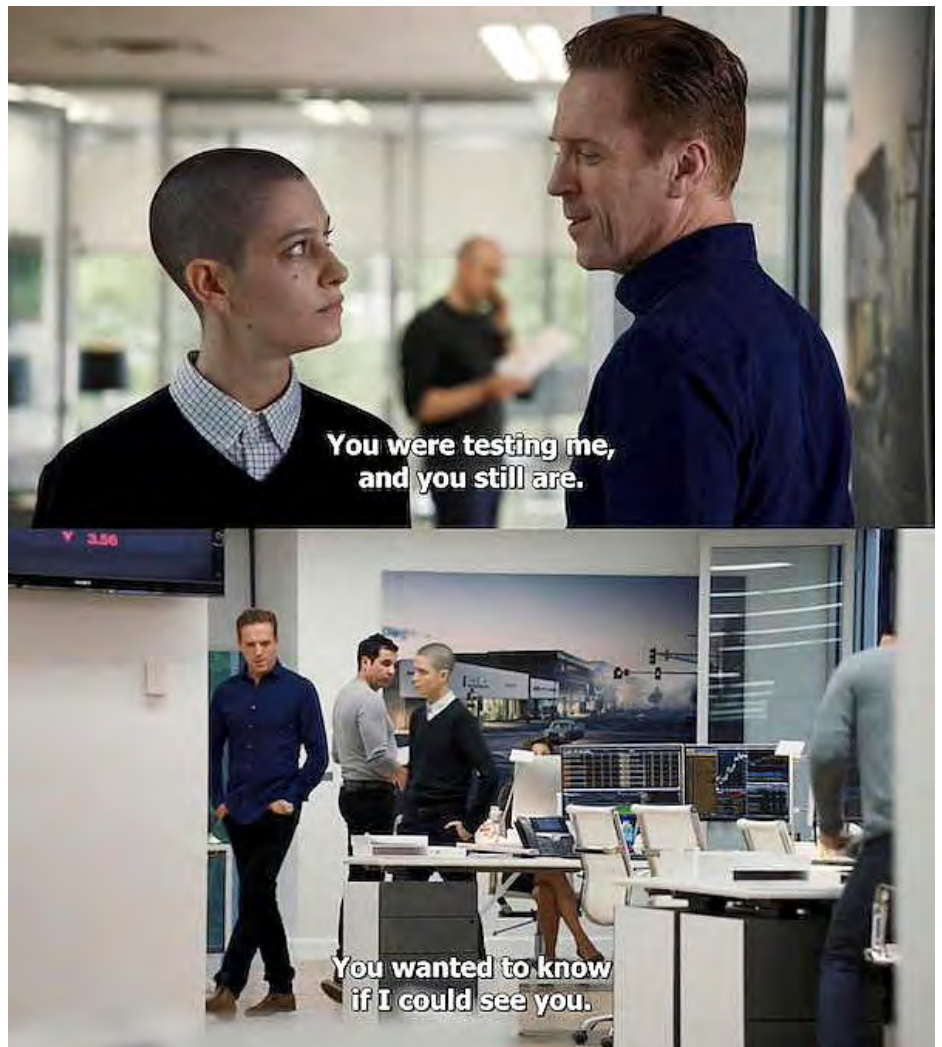
Instead, *Billions* creates a controlled experiment with a typical character who has only one variable—their non-binary gender. Through such a construction, the series manages to queer not only the trope of the Wall Street (anti)hero but also the television genius character—the likes of Mr. Spock, Gregory House, or Sherlock Holmes (Canode; Charles)—a reworking deserving of its own analysis another time. Taylor’s introduction across the two episodes is a careful balancing act of these two facets of the character—their professional and personal perspective—demonstrating why just the latter would be enough to challenge the status quo at a place like Axe Cap.

I find it fascinating that out of all possible settings, the introduction of the first non-binary character takes place on Wall Street, known for its persistent issues with (and resistance to addressing) gender inequality, sexual harassment (Antilla) and lack of diversity. This last problem, diversity, appears to improve but only for the summer internship period (Holman et al.; Vittorio) which, interestingly, is also when Taylor joins Axe Cap. “Wall Street and hedge funds are some of the slowest changing institutions. It would be great to introduce somebody into Axe Capital who was quite different—could Axe see through this exterior to notice that what is exceptional?” explain Koppelman and Levien, aware of these realities (*Billions* on SHOWTIME 00:03). The same way Taylor puts Axe to the test, *Billions* does so with Wall Street’s own ethos and claims of being a meritocracy



The contrast in tone between Taylor's introductory scene and the preceding one (“Risk Management”).

(Ho, Maclean).



Taylor puts Axe to the test, as *Billions* does Wall Street's ethos, as well as its own viewers ("Dead Cat Bounce").

Koppelman and Levien admit they intentionally "don't make broad social statements on the show [and] want to allow the viewer to make them for themselves" (qtd. in Williams). Taylor's introduction is not a broad statement either, or a seemingly direct one. Yet, upon closer analysis, the second episode appears to undo some of the forms of discriminations likely to happen to a person like Taylor, in a place like Axe Cap. It is not only the quick recognition of their pronouns but also the scene preceding it. Taylor's appearance before Axe is a pure accident that would otherwise never happen if Mafee were to take credit for their idea; known in some circles as "hepeating," it is a sad and common practice refusing to acknowledge the contributions of subordinates who are members of marginalized groups (Deo; Dodgson). Identity-based prejudice continues to be a major problem which staggering numbers of transgender employees experience (Herman et al.), but prior to the 2020 Supreme Court ruling it would not even qualify as workplace discrimination (Tonengerg). In the show, Taylor's gender is never used to sideline them or undermine their expertise. On the contrary, the non-binary character is sought after by Axe and in an unusual friendly or desperate manner, judging by the heads turning and looks following as the two



Mafee comes very close to “hepeating” Taylor’s idea (“Dead Cat Bounce”).



At Axe Cap, gender suddenly does not matter when the numbers are there, but this is not the experience many women and members of minorities actually have at Wall Street (Ho, Maclean, Polk).

walk-and-talk—which was also Koppelman and Levien’s favorite scene to shoot (qtd. in Hibberd). Finally, the scene concluding Taylor’s introduction establishes Axe Cap and *Billions* as, arguably unlikely, proponents of diversity on Wall Street.

Axe: Make it a million a year ... What? 370, 750, a million. It’s all the same for you? It’s an ... abstraction?

Taylor: I don’t know if you can understand maybe *me being the way I am*, but just *breathing the air here can be discomforting*.

Axe: The air is thinner ... [suddenly] Nah. You don’t belong here.

Taylor: [surprised and distraught]

Axe: You’re outside it all ... Sometimes you catch yourself watching all the people like they’re another species. So you retreat ... behind your aquarium walls, watching. But you don’t realize, Taylor, *that glass, it’s not a barrier, it’s a lens. It’s an asset. It’s what makes you good. You see things differently. That’s an edge.*

Taylor: [elated]... What about a week-to-week deal?” (emphasis added; “Dead Cat Bounce” 40:35)

Though rather thickly veiled in metaphors, Axe’s statement acknowledges the boy’s club culture of hedge funds, as well as Taylor’s identity in its entirety. Yet, Axe does not see this as a factor that should put them at a disadvantage, but one of immense potential. This meeting is the last scene of Taylor’s two-part introduction. With it, *Billions* brings together the two facets of the new character—their expertise and outsider point of view—to make a statement: this is the combination Wall Street should finally begin to value. Thus, the series manages to simultaneously critique the industry it depicts and highlight the value of Taylor’s perspective without essentializing their abilities. As Rachel Syme puts it:

“Besides being the first gender-nonbinary character on television, Taylor is a *true outlier*, a person who sees the entire landscape of the financial crowd from a slightly tilted angle. Axe comes to find Taylor invaluable and seems to take the position that *gender doesn’t factor so much as how brilliant someone is at seeing minute fluctuations in the markets.*” (emphasis added)

As a result, Taylor takes on the function of the “enlightener,” a type described by Lynne Joyrich, informing the other characters and the viewers about their gender identity, but also calling attention to the often exclusionary culture of the high finance world. If Wall Street as an industry truly is as meritocratic as it believes itself to be, then the issue of discrimination should not affect it either—and yet continues to do so (Cohan; Kolhatkar; Graham; Polk; Rew et al.).

The one concern that possibly emerges from the depiction of Taylor as this exceptional individual is whether or not the representation in *Billions* engages in



Axe Cap has been described as a “boys’ club” from the very beginning (“YumTime”).

a “respectability” narrative. For example, Scott Von Doviak believes that “Axe is relaxed and accepting of [Taylor] from the start, not necessarily because he’s the wokest billionaire but because he knows an edge when he sees it.” However, this is also what would make his rejection of Taylor almost unthinkable. Axe never questions or mocks Taylor’s gender, pronouns, or affects because he is not ideologically motivated. Acknowledging their identity and accepting them fully for who they are is not a revolutionary or out-of-character act for Axe, precisely because he is “value-driven” (Koppelman and Levien qtd. in Williams). Nussbaum describes him as “a vision of pure meritocratic transcendence, of being so good at your job that the world just lets you do it, no matter whom you hurt”—or what your gender and pronouns are. Due to the combination of their qualities, Lauren Williams observes that “Taylor quickly becomes an asset, *as well as* a mirror reflecting on everyone around them” (emphasis added). Scott Tobias also points out that “putting Taylor . . . alongside the animals on Axe’s killing floor sets up a fascinating contrast in behavior and temperament that threatens to upend the frat-house atmosphere.” Indeed, with the introduction of Taylor, *Billions* implants a constant counterpart that puts into question whether the finance world needs all its “display of hegemonic masculinity” (Boisvert), “dog-eat-dog” attitude (M. Kessler), and “willy-waving and ego and greed inspired risk-taking” (Whitworth qtd. in Maclean).

With the character’s presence and success at Axe Cap, *Billions* is engaging in a form of “disidentification,” echoing the concept from José Esteban Muñoz’s queer of color critique. By both queering the Wall Street type and instilling them with contrarian views, *Billions* “tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against” (Muñoz qtd. in Chávez 151) the conventional representation of the high finance world and its all-male heroes (Maclean; Ferrero et al.; Parvulescu). As a result, Taylor emerges as a new kind of the Wall Street protagonist—one with the same unshaken confidence and impressive skillset as the old guard but without the baggage of their prejudices and outdated ideals, including gender. The introduction of Taylor and their recruitment into Axe Cap may offer somewhat of “a utopian blueprint” (Muñoz qtd. in Koch-Rein et al. 5) but also one conservative and oppressive environments like the high finance industry could use.



Taylor vs. other Wall Street heroes (here, based on titles included in Parvulescu and Pilnick: *American Psycho*, *Boiler Room*, *Wall Street*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, and *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*).

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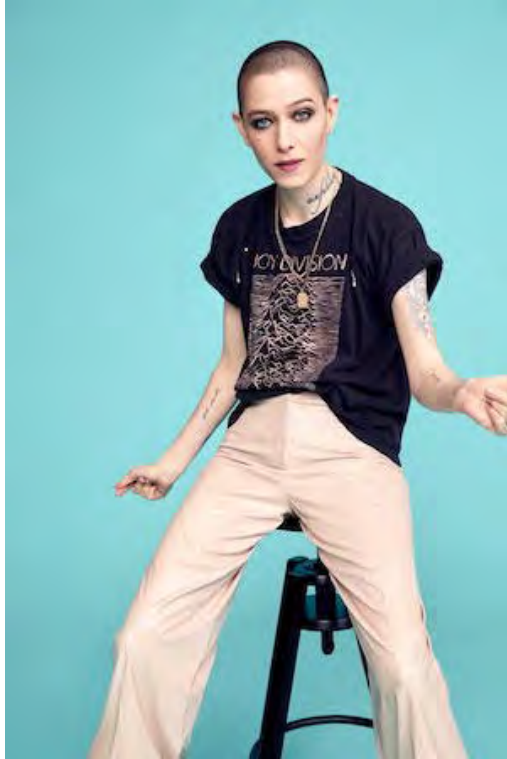


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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Non-binary negotiated



Dillon outside of *Billions* (Photo by Levitt).

Aside from acting as the *enlighteners*, queer characters often take on role of the *enigmas* when “their identity represents a narrative disruption and a problem to be solved” (Parsemain 76). [\[open works cited in new window\]](#) Taylor’s stance as the non-binary contrarian definitely qualifies as *enlightener*, but some in the audience also perceive them as a quasi-*enigma*. Stéfany Boisvert’s analysis of the comments following Taylor’s introduction identifies “a pervasive tendency on the part of many viewers to try to ‘solve’ gender ambiguities and attribute a specific gender to this non-binary character” (193). In a way, there is not much to “solve” here, other than acknowledge a non-binary gender, especially since *Billions* makes it as visible and palpable as possible for the mainstream viewer through Taylor’s physical characterization.

James Keller and Leslie Stratyner argue,

“GLBT narratives are only aired on television after significant compromises and concessions have been made—concessions intended to coddle a still reticent public, to render queer sexualities *safe*, *invisible*, or *agreeable*” (qtd. in Fellner 3).

Billions appears to negotiate Taylor’s non-binary gender following very similar principles, starting with their physical characterization. Nussbaum describes Taylor as “bone-thin, dressed in trim gray vests, with a freckled, meditative air” but does not seem to make the connection with non-binary stereotypes. Meanwhile, non-binary viewer Cassolotl expresses a much more critical opinion:

“Taylor is white, AFAB [assigned female at birth], thin, young, wealthy, able-bodied, and masculine-presenting. They fit the nonbinary cliché so well that I can’t even find any deviation from it. In reality nonbinary people are very diverse in pronouns, gender presentation, race, body type, and class. But when newspapers are interviewing these “new” and fascinating nonbinary people, they always seem to choose people mostly like [Taylor].”



Taylor's range of outfits ("Optimal Play"; "The Oath"; "Currency"; "Victory Lap")

The key issue of Taylor's gender presentation is not that it is offensive or incorrect, rather that it is predictable—or, in Kellner and Stratyner's words, *safe* (qtd. in Fellner 3), considering the already available and recognizable forms of gender nonconforming expressions. One of the priorities of the community is dispelling this myth that a non-binary person, needs to look "androgynous" or "androgynous" in a particular way to have their gender perceived as legitimate (Ballou; Weiss).



The 2019 "Fall Fashion: The New Androgyny" editorial from *The New York Times Style Magazine* (Alas et al.) illustrates Simmons' argument perfectly.

As Treavian Simmons explains:

"Signifiers of aesthetic androgyny often include short, 'boyish' haircuts, a lean, angular body, the ability to 'pull off' makeup despite one's actual gender, an affinity for well-fitted suits and nondescript but fashion-forward clothing, and any other visual identifier that can upend notions of traditional masculinity or femininity . . . The



Photography projects promoting the diversity of identities and expressions among non-binary people (Collette and Holmes; Tritt).

dominance of this particular trope ideologically and visually displaces other non-binary identities while obscuring their attendant representations in media.”

Consequently, if non-binary genders receive any visibility in the Western mainstream media, it has been “dominated by what is now a stereotypical androgynous presentation” (Simmons), which Taylor embodies.

Meg-John Barker also identifies “the limited young, white, thin image of androgyny provided by the fashion industry” as a particularly enduring “mould,” not only in terms of gender presentation. The prevalence of this notion of a non-binary person stems from a broader and outstanding issue of representing intersecting identities and experiences. Barker continues,

“Intersectionality is [a] major challenge in this movement [which] can mean that the main visible non-binary people end up being wealthy, highly educated, middle-class, white, often masculine-of-centre, and not visibly disabled” (38).

Clearly, *Billions* does not answer this call for more intersectional representations, as this quite literally describes Taylor’s social position. However, the privileged background and physical presentation make the character *agreeable* in the realities of the series. Their characterization apart from their gender and views does not make them stand out from the financial crowd at Axe Cap at all. In some ways, the non-binary Millennial challenges the expectations of a hedge fund analyst, while in many others they resemble their peers at Axe Cap, who are almost all “white, thin, young, wealthy, able-bodied, and masculine-presenting” like Taylor (Cassolotl).



The styling may be a safe and predictable choice in terms of non-binary representation, but also the typical dress-code at Axe Cap (“Currency”).

For the same reason, Dillon believes the character may prove to be “more accessible” to many viewers (qtd in B. Kessler)—likely in a similar way Piper Chapman did in *Orange Is the New Black*. Jenji Kohan references “The Trojan Horse” explaining how the protagonist of her series helped bypass the reservations of the network executives and a significant part of their target demographic. Kate Sullivan Barak comments:

“If Piper, the white, upper-middle class, well-educated, straight-

appearing female character, was a Trojan Horse, this meant her positioning was intentional ... not only intentional, but a strategic move of counterhegemonic storytelling. Imagining this ‘accessible,’ ‘cool blonde’ as a clever tool for sneaking diverse stories onto the main stage made sense, albeit sad logic.” (46)



The diverse range of stories as in *Orange Is the New Black* can (?) make it on television ... but only with “the girl next door, the cool blonde” positioned as their central perspective. (Kohan in Barak; Netflix).

A similar approach can be identified in the construction of Taylor. Their otherwise privileged background allows the series to “sneak in” a more challenging topic of their non-binary gender right in front of the mainstream viewer.



Piper (“I Wasn’t Ready”) and Taylor’s (“Risk Management”) privileged positions allow them to “sneak” more challenging topics into the mainstream—though why these need to be mediated for mainstream viewers is a separate issue.

This attempt to make the character “more accessible” could further explain the choice for the conventionally “androgynous” or “gender-neutral” presentation, especially considering that *Billions* avoids directly addressing Taylor’s gender. Seemingly *Billions* trusts its viewers are either aware of the topic or open-minded

enough to explore it further. This approach has the stamp of approval from Dillon:

“If the show were to deviate into a very specific, political, gender identity storyline, that would actually make the character's gender identity much more precious than I think it is” (qtd. in Idato).

Thus, while the series makes Taylor’s gender *safe* and *agreeable*, the opposite might be true in terms of its *visibility*. If the primary objective of television is not to educate but rather not to alienate (Parsemain), the non-binary gender in *Billions* must (?) be rendered visible and recognizable, given the still limited awareness of the notion among general public (Pew Research Center; GLAAD, “Accelerating Acceptance”) and the series’ reluctance to school its audience on the topic. Richard Dyer proposes that the functions of stereotypes become most evident when

“dealing with social categories that are invisible and/or fluid. Such categories are invisible, because you cannot tell just from looking at a person that she or he [sic] belongs to the category in question. *Unless the person chooses to dress or act in a clearly and culturally defined manner . . . or unless one has a trained eye . . . it is impossible to place the person before one*” (emphasis added; *The Matter of Images* 16)

This is the case with non-binary gender, or any gender for that matter (Iantaffi and Barker; Richards et al.). So as not to alienate the underinformed viewer, Taylor’s gender appears to be encoded through such a “set of visual and aural signs which immediately bespeak . . . and connote the qualities associated, stereotypically, with it” (Dyer, “Stereotyping” 358). The concepts of non-binary gender and androgyny are obviously not synonymous, but they do evoke an idea of existence beyond the notions of strict masculinity and femininity (Joz et al.). Effectively, the series renders (or attempts to) the non-binary gender “visible” through the recognizable “androgynous” presentation as a form of *iconography* (Dyer, *The Matter of Images* and “Stereotyping”)—to signal Taylor’s gender without the need to reference or explain it directly.



The term “non-binary” is never mentioned in the second season, only in the promotional materials (*Billions* on SHOWTIME 00:46).



Taylor Mason (“Optimal Play”) and androgyny as conventionally (mis)understood (here, based on top Pinterest suggestions).

Character concept and casting

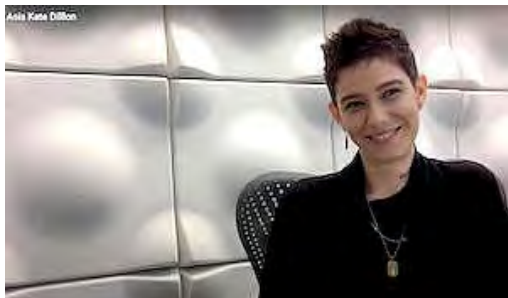
Among Koppelman and Levien’s most successful films are *Rounders*, *The Illusionist*, *Solitary Man*, and *Ocean’s Thirteen*. As they admit themselves, “since they were kids, [both] were fascinated by two things: power and wealth” and have followed this curiosity throughout their career (qtd. in Altucher). Their scripts often revolve around the themes of gambling, deception, and making



Frequent collaborates and writing partners Brian Koppelman and David Levien (Photo by Wells for Variety).



First Millennials and now also GenZ are considered as “The Gender-Fluid Generation” (Marsh) who finally pushed the topics of gender spectrum into the mainstream (Steinmetz, “Beyond”).



Dillon in the interview with Anne Thompson (00:03).

money legally or not, present also in *Billions* (Petski). However, social issues and LGBTQIA+ representation were never before the primary focus of the duo. The initiative to introduce a gender non-binary character came from Koppelman and Levien, though not (strictly speaking) directly. During the writing of season 2, Koppelman’s son “shared his experience with his father of how teens automatically introduce themselves with the pronouns they use.” Meanwhile, his daughter’s teacher “invited students in her classes to regularly announce their preferred [sic] pronouns . . . in case anyone has had a new development or in case anyone has realized or decided to acknowledge something.” The interview also reveals that the young non-binary person was not written into the show, but rather Koppelman and Levien modified the existing character concept to address the lack of visibility (Williams). Dillon explains:

“It began as an organic conversation about their kids’ worlds and their kids’ friends, so when they were developing a character that was younger, who was an intern, it just sort of made sense to them to have that character be in this world. It didn’t come out of a social justice place to create a token character, or to be the first show with a non-binary character. If it had been that I wouldn’t have wanted to do it.” (qtd. in Göksenin)

Thus, the idea for the character came as a result of personal relationships with gender non-binary people, as well as the influence of a “younger generation [who] is not only primed for this conversation . . . around gender and identity, but they seem to already be having it” (qtd. in Williams). While the topic’s visibility is growing, especially among Millennials and GenZ (Parker et al.), it also appears concentrated within particular groups and cohorts (Meerwijk and Sevelius). Surveys from GLAAD and Pew indicate that only about 20% of Americans personally know someone who is transgender, even fewer a non-binary person. The numbers also tend to fall among middle-aged and older adults (Pew Research Center; GLAAD, “Accelerating Acceptance”). In reference to those statistics, trans actor Laverne Cox emphasizes the need for authentic representation since “most of the information that Americans get about who transgender people are, what [their] lives are and are about comes from the media” (qtd. in Feder 21:00).

From the very beginning of the *Billions* casting process, the character of Taylor Mason was meant to be “female, non-binary” who uses the singular, gender-neutral pronoun “they” (Dillon, Interview with Anne Thompson 01:08; Idato). Dillon admitted that prior to auditions, they did not identify as non-binary specifically, simply because they were not aware of such gender possibilities. In an interview with Thompson, the actor describes how the character breakdown helped them finally understand their own gender:

“I felt ambiguous about my gender identity my whole life, before I even had the words that I can put to those thought or feelings. I started experimenting with gender non-conformity in middle school and high school in terms of how I dressed, how I cut my hair, things like that. And then a couple of years ago I became aware of a performer Taylor Mac who uses any number of pronouns . . . it gave me the first taste of that identity could be an autonomous decision actually. And so I started removing gender pronouns from my online bios . . . Then when I came across the character breakdown for Taylor, the character I play on *Billions*, which said ‘female, non-binary’ . . . I looked up the word “female” and saw that “female” is a sex,

an assigned sex; and 'non-binary' is a gender identity, and that sex and gender identity are different. It was the first time my mind was opened to the understanding that sex and gender identity are two different things. Sometimes they conform, sometimes they don't." (Interview with Anne Thompson 00:26-01:50)



Pidgeon Pagonis, one of Hardell's interviewees, describes an experience very similar to Dillon's (03:28).

Dillon's account closely resembles those given in *It's (NOT) Just a Phase* (Hardell) or *Disclosure* (Feder). Much like several of the featured interviewees, Dillon could not identify their gender, until they came across the terminology to name it. Such statements further illustrate why the more visibility transgender identities receive in the media, the more people begin to declare it—simply because they become aware of the notion and, therefore, are able to recognize them in themselves, which further underlines the need for such representation (Flores et al.; Meerwijk and Sevelius).

Yet, despite the precise role description of Taylor as “female, non-binary,” the production did not specifically seek an actor of such gender. Koppelman admits: “many people auditioned [for the role of Taylor]. Cis people. [Binary] Trans people. And a few gender non-binary people. We were open to finding the best actor for the role” (@briankoppelman). Fortunately, Taylor is portrayed by the now out Dillon whose gender corresponds to Taylor's (*Billions* on SHOWTIME). This is especially important considering the unfortunate tendency to cast cisgender actors in transgender roles with “only a few examples of people who, like Dillon, portray characters on television who share their own marginalized identity” (Williams).



Brian Koppelman @briankoppelman · 7 may, 2018

Many, many people auditioned. Cis people. Trans people. And a few gender non binary people. We were open to finding the best actor for the part. Asia read three different times. Made adjustments. And knocked us out. We fell in love w them as Taylor. Showtime saw it same way.



Mark Roberts @Aggie_Mark · 7 may, 2018

En respuesta a @briankoppelman

How many read for Taylor? @AsiaKateDillon plays arguably the most intriguing character on television rt now. Thank you both. #Emmy

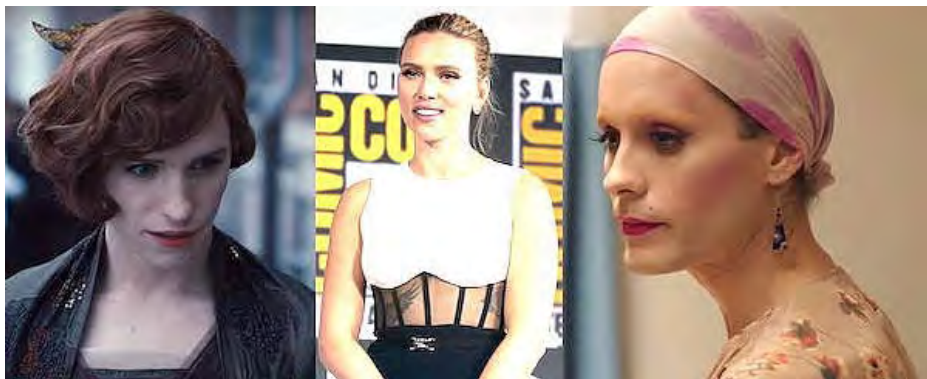
Koppelman's tweet about casting Taylor also suggests Showtime sought a specific type of a non-binary character (@briankoppelman).

As Jamie Capuzza and Leland Spencer demonstrate, more television series now make a point to feature transgender actors in the roles of transgender characters; especially following casting Laverne Cox as Sophia Burset in *Orange Is the New Black* and its momentum as the “tipping point” for transgender visibility in mainstream media and public discourse (Householder and Trier-Bieniek; Steinmetz). The topic of “representative casting” (Shea in “Spotlight”) remains a particularly contested one, with some emphasizing the need of authenticity when depicting marginalized groups, while others arguing the approach is fundamentally incongruent with the very definition of acting (Gelt). A general consensus in support of the former appears to have emerged regarding transgender roles specifically, as Hollywood begins to acknowledge both the glaring lack of opportunities for transgender actors (Setoodeh), as well as the implications of a cisgender person playing the part (Feder). However, considering that as recently as 2018 such roles were given to high-profile or up-and-rising movie stars almost by default (Han), this comes as a *change* in the industry, one that requires recognizing the missteps of the past portrayals, and actively preventing them from happening again. Meanwhile, by casting a non-binary actor, *Billions* sets a precedent from the very beginning proposing it as the



Laverne Cox on “The Transgender Tipping Point” cover of *The Times* (Steinmetz).

standard of non-binary representation.



In 2018, Scarlett Johansson (Photo by Skidmore) was almost cast as transgender gangster Dante “Tex” Gill, if not for the public backlash the news caused. The actor hoped the role would bring her critical accolades, as such roles usually do for cisgender actors, including Eddie Redmayne (*The Danish Girl*) and Jared Leto (*Dallas Buyers Club*) just a couple years prior (Diller, Han).

The importance of having Dillon play the part cannot be overestimated if we also consider how detrimental the lack of adequate representation of marginalized groups may be for their members (Flores et al; Ellithorpe and Bleakley; Mastro; Meerwijk and Sevelius Martins and Harrison). Meanwhile, even with several non-binary characters introduced after Taylor, there is still merely a handful of opportunities for gender non-conforming people to not only see their experience represented, but also their peers succeed on screen or in mainstream entertainment altogether. Neither Matty Cardarople (Tijetje), nor Marwan Salam (Morton) who also played non-binary characters in 2017 (in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and *Here and Now* respectively) themselves appear to identify as such (when cast and as of writing this essay). Though there are some gender non-binary people among celebrities, Dillon seems to be one of the first actors to begin their career already out (Fleener; Fuentes).



Ruby Rose (*Orange Is the New Black*), Indya Moore (*Pose*), and Lachlan Watson (*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*) are some of the few non-binary actors working in the mainstream (Fleenor).

Thus, by choosing Dillon for the role, *Billions* gives visibility to both the topic of non-binary gender, as well as its real-life representative who fully understands the importance of this character for non-binary viewers:

“If there has been someone like Taylor on TV. It would have really meant something for me. So it feels good to play a character that might mean something to someone else” (Billions on SHOWTIME 01:26).

While many productions still fail to bring in a qualified consultant before portraying a marginalized identity (Alcaraz in Jagannathan; Feder; Leary; Pensoneau), their involvement in the show provides an ever-present, authentic, first-hand perspective on the characterization of Taylor and the language they use. For example, some of the lines were changed after the actor commented that a non-binary person would not use gender-biased language (Interview with Anne Thompson; Hibberd). However, Dillon rejects the suggestion they are a “trailblazer,” instead highlighting the history of gender minorities:

“I am one part of the community, whose visibility would not be possible without the work that had been done before me by the people



Dillon at the Critic's Choice Awards in 2018
(Photo by Braun).

who continue to be the most marginalized from the movement” (qtd. in Paiella).

Conclusion

Taylor Mason emerges as a new type of the Wall Street protagonist and a counterpart to other, borderline satirical, “alpha male” portrayals present in *Billions*, as well as numerous other productions. Their introduction reads not only as a critique of the tropes but also the culture of the Financial District. With the acknowledgment and acceptance of Taylor’s identity and pronouns, *Billions* offers an alternative vision of Wall Street—one where perspectives, genders, and backgrounds from outside of the frat boy houses would also be valued. Thus, by introducing Taylor and casting Dillon in the role, *Billions* challenges the glass ceiling for non-binary people in television representation, Hollywood, and a male-dominated world of high finance. Or at least its fictional rendition.



From Taylor Mason the contrarian intern
("The Kingmaker") ...



... to Taylor Mason the new Wall Street
hero ("Ball in Hand").

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Promotional image for Season 4 of *Transparent*.



Series creator Joey Soloway and actor Jeffrey Tambor received critical acclaim and multiple Emmy Awards for *Transparent*.

A fine balance along the Mechitza: navigating privilege, pinkwashing, and Palestinian politics in *Transparent*'s fourth season

by [Jordan Z. Adler](#)

Since its initial broadcast on Amazon Prime in 2014, the television series *Transparent* has centered in a multifaceted debate related to the representation of queer and trans narratives on the small screen. Much of the rancor has revolved around the decision to cast a cisgender male actor, Jeffrey Tambor, as its protagonist, a transgender woman named Maura. Meanwhile, the narrative of the Emmy-winning comedy-drama series stems from the experiences of its show's creator, Joey Soloway, whose paternal figure transitioned to a matriarch. To assuage frequent notices of disapproval from LGBTQ+ critics, Soloway employed on the series several transgender men and women as actors, directors, consultants, and creative practitioners. Echoing this conflict as well as *Transparent*'s commitment to exploring an authentic trans narrative, Tambor concluded his 2016 Emmy speech (for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy Series) by exclaiming that he "would not be unhappy were [he] the last cisgender male to play a transgender character on television."

Despite its awards pedigree and vanguard stature as one of the first mainstream U.S. screen narratives about a trans character, Soloway's series has not always been able to compete with the hefty burden of queer commentary that has consistently undermined the show for its white, upper middle-class perspective. In a mostly praiseworthy article about the series, cinema and media studies scholar Amy Villarejo noted that the show is restrictive in aspects of its representation, writing that the milieu where its main family, the Pfeffermans, reside "is an expansive, expensive, white Los Angeles... in the Pacific Palisades," referring to a coastal neighborhood known for its wealthy occupants (12). [[open works cited page in new tab](#)]

Meanwhile, *Transparent* is informed more by Jewish customs, characterizations, and identities than queer or trans components. *New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum once deemed Soloway's series "the most Jewish show [she had] ever seen on TV" (Rosenberg 77). *Transparent* also brought a flurry of critical writing about how its trans elements extend from the focus on non-cisgender characters. This includes the show's odd blending of comedy and pathos: series writer Cate Haight described its tone as "funcomfortable," which enabled the series to "break from both normative comedy and sitcom genre traditions" (Moss 78). Meanwhile, in her writing on the contemporary queer tragicomedy, English professor Lindsey Kurz expanded on how the show blurs generic lines. Although trauma and personal tragedy are consistent themes throughout *Transparent*, she writes that



After winning the Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy Series Emmy in 2016 for his role in *Transparent*, Jeffrey Tambor makes a plea for Hollywood to “give transgender talent a chance.” This statement is an acknowledgement of the cisgender male actor’s conflicted feelings about playing a trans woman on television.



Maura and Ali Pfefferman get their first glimpses of Israel, in a cab ride to their Tel Aviv hotel. “Not as many yarmulkes as you may think,” Maura remarks.



Transparent’s fourth season investigates Ali’s emotional insecurity and gender fluidity, as she navigates borders both literal and figurative.

“the prevailing tone is comic in that the characters are learning, evolving, and building better lives for themselves outside of heteronormative structures” (92).

As a series that frequently engages with both trans and Jewish matters, *Transparent* occupies a complex space in the U.S. cultural landscape, especially when it comes to its depiction of progressive queer politics. Joshua Louis Moss writes that transgender identity “becomes safer when performed by screen Jews, the privileged avatars of historical televisual transgression” (76). That tricky relationship to Jewish and sexual politics became a major theme of the show’s fourth season, which arrived on the Amazon Prime streaming platform in September 2017, where the Pfefferman family travels to Israel. In the episodes, the dominant storylines revolve around the social justice-minded Ali (Gaby Hoffmann), who grapples with her identity after befriending queer Palestinian women and beginning to feel caught between literal and physical borders, and Maura, who discovers that her father, long perceived to be dead, is alive and living in the Holy Land. Similar to the series’ complicated relationship to queer activist politics, the fourth season of *Transparent* approached the contentious Israeli-Palestinian conflict in ways that were more radical than anything on mainstream U.S. television, while also, in part, adhering to rigid cultural imaginations surrounding Israel that endorse pro-Zionist positions.

For a comedy about several “wandering Jew” figures trying to solidify their place in the world – spiritually, sexually, emotionally – *Transparent* uses its season-long sojourn to Israel to provide a sense of salvation, renewal, and even occasional happiness to its neurotic L.A.-based cast of characters. This essay will investigate the Amazon series’ Holy Land tourism in its fourth season, where the majority of the ten episodes are set in Israel and the occupied West Bank. It will critically examine the approaches of its makers to adhere to a current cultural boycott and bring a voice (and face) to queer Palestinian activists resisting the Occupation, while also conforming to aesthetics and themes that are friendly to the State of Israel.

In particular, I will analyze the practice of *pinkwashing*, a public relations tactic that uses images of LGBTQ-friendly components within Israeli society as a mask to shield the country from criticism about its human rights abuses. In its adoption of an Israeli boycott, originally declared by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) in 2004, *Transparent* mostly avoided filming in the Middle East. Although its makers seamlessly use Southern California as a substitute, the messaging is mixed, as many scenes from the season also glorify Israel as a beacon of spiritual prosperity and a space that evokes belonging for both Jews and Americans.

I also explore the representation of queer activism toward the Israeli Occupation, and how the series uses gay, lesbian, and transgender characters to demonstrate a type of regional resistance that rarely receives exposure in U.S. mass media. Furthermore, the second half will focus mainly on Ali’s storyline. Her conflicted feelings toward the sociopolitical climate in the Middle East reflects the feelings of instability within her body, showing how deftly *Transparent* intertwines matters related to politics, spirituality and sexual orientation.

Los Angeles plays Israel

The title of the fourth season’s third episode is “Pinkwashing Machine,” although unlike the names of several previous half-hours of *Transparent*, nobody utters the titular words. The reference could be lost on those unfamiliar with the concept. The term “pinkwashing” was popularized by Sarah Schulman, who outlined her burgeoning solidarity with Palestinian causes and PACBI in her book, *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*, as well as a *New York Times*



Transparent's opening titles sequence, for the fourth season, incorporates aspects of the Israeli landscape through clips of the Holy Land. The image of religious Jews praying at Jerusalem's Western Wall foreshadows this setting's significance.



Ali confides in Maura that she wants to accompany her on a trip to Israel.



A nervous Maura travels to the plush seaside home of her long-lost father, Moshe, who she presumed was dead.

editorial. In the journalistic outlet, she defined pinkwashing as

“a deliberate strategy [by Israel and its supporters] to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians’ human rights behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life” (*New York Times*).

In spite of that column’s widespread circulation, Schulman considered her political crusade to bring attention to Israel’s occupation largely unsuccessful, citing the numerous occasions of criticism and censorship toward those who oppose U.S. policy on Israel (89). One recent instance of this opprobrium involved CNN commentator Marc Lamont Hill, who the cable news channel fired in November 2018 after comments he made during a speech at the United Nations were characterized as “anti-Israel.”

Pinkwashing is closely associated with the concept of “hasbara,” the Hebrew word for “explaining,” which refers to information disseminated by Israel, mainly for Western audiences, to create an appealing picture of the Holy Land. In these efforts to “re-brand” Israel as a liberal democracy that is sympathetic to LGBTQ rights, queerness

“is used as an ideological tool... that serves to portray Israel as modern, progressive, and pro-gay (in other words, Western) in the face of an Arab Muslim enemy said to be religious, barbaric, regressive, integrally homophobic” (Moussa 13-14).

Intellectuals like Judith Butler, moreover, have criticized claims put forward by hasbara PR efforts that Israel is a safer space for queer Palestinians than Palestine (Moussa 15).

Schulman’s stature within the American LGBTQ arts and culture scene – she is a playwright, screenwriter, and co-founder of New York’s MIX Festival, which screens experimental queer works – provided her a platform to help influence the production of *Transparent's* fourth season. As Soloway revealed in their recent memoir, *She Wants It: Desire, Power, and Toppling the Patriarchy*, a letter signed by Schulman and other artists sympathetic to Palestinian human rights convinced the show’s producers not to film in Israel. Soloway explained that the activists

“made me see how the otherization inherent in the moral arguments for the occupation matches how patriarchy and white supremacy operate. Traveling to Israel and spending money there would have been seen by our queer siblings in the interconnected liberation movements as crossing the boycott, and we just couldn’t do that” (196).

As Schulman wrote in October 2018, the effort to convince *Transparent's* production team to film outside of Israel took three months, and the conversations included activists from the left-wing anti-Zionist group Jewish Voices for Peace as well as Omar Barghouti, a co-founder of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (*Mondoweiss*). Several of the series’ producers went to Israel to scout locations before writing the fourth season, according to production designer Cat Smith, but the crews ended up filming in Southern California (Liebman). The one concession Schulman has with the production is that Soloway and their crew filmed B-roll and cutaways in Israel and the occupied West Bank, contrary to her suggestion to use available archival



Ali gazes out at the Holy Land, as she and Lyfe travel to a checkpoint near Ramallah in the West Bank. Although *Transparent* did not film the vast majority of its fourth seasons in Israel, Soloway's crew did capture B-roll for cutaways in Israel and Palestine.

footage of the Holy Land (*Mondoweiss*).

Another integral voice that ensured the season did not benefit the Israeli economy was Shay Roman, an associate producer of *Transparent* and a member of IfNotNow, an American Jewish anti-Occupation organization. IfNotNow's advocacy aims can be linked with the dilemmas inherent to Ali's journey in the fourth season. The "Pinkwashing Machine" episode features strongly voiced opinions about the cultural boycott. Ali's love interest, a black queer activist named Lyfe (Folake Olowofeyeku), convinces the youngest Pfefferman sibling to travel with her to Ramallah, citing the boycott as the reason she does not want to spend money in Israel.

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| <p>At dusk, the activists answer several of Ali's questions about life in the West Bank, including the indignities of travelling through a security checkpoint.</p> | <p>A compassionate, if somewhat naïve Ali gets an education about the Israeli Occupation.</p> |

On a farm in Ramallah later in the episode, where Ali feasts on the local cuisine with a multiracial group of Palestinian and Israeli activists in their twenties and thirties, the American inquires if any of them ever break the boycott to consume delicious Israeli treats. (The reply: "Only when we're drunk.") In that conversation, a minor character expresses that there are reasons to break the boycott, explaining that there is a need to purchase tomatoes (such as the ones present at their meal) in Israel because "you can't get Palestinian tomatoes," a reference to Israel's stronghold over prosperous regional farmland. Meanwhile, the articulation of how numerous characters within these episodes who identify as queer are also anti-Occupation activists speaks toward the intersectional relationship between these shared struggles.



Lyfe encourages Ali to travel with her to Ramallah, as she does not want to "break the boycott" and spend money at a café in Israel.

Although the balmy climate of Southern California stands in for Israel during *Transparent*'s production, this posing and substitution has an unintended side effect: the U.S. characters in *Transparent* continually refer to the State of Israel through its commonalities with the United States. The geographical similarities between that country and Southern California, with their warm weather and mountainous topography, create an instability during establishing shots – especially when the series intercuts between plots in the Middle East and Los Angeles. Those parallels between the urban spaces infer that the city upon the shore of the Mediterranean (Tel Aviv) echoes the bustling beachside space of the city gazing out to the Pacific Ocean (Los Angeles).

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A view of the Mediterranean Sea from Moshe's seaside home. This scene was actually filmed near the Pacific Ocean.



The Pfefferman family arrives on an Israeli settlement, but the buildings and the mountains recall Southern California.



Instability within an establishing shot, as the story moves between Tel Aviv and Los Angeles. Where is this image supposed to represent? The balmy weather and mountainous topography doesn't make a distinction.

As Israeli author Nir Cohen explains, there is an aspiration for Tel Aviv “to represent progress, modernity, and secularism, as well as an affinity with the West” (28). In Cohen’s book on gay representation in Israeli cinema, he elaborates on Tel Aviv’s symbol as a space where otherness and queer culture can flourish – qualities that closely intersect with Los Angeles’ reputation as a haven for LGBTQ narratives, such as *Transparent* and the critically-acclaimed 2015 film *Tangerine*, directed by Sean Baker (29-30). One of the most popular contemporary Israeli films, Eytan Fox’s gay-friendly, Tel Aviv-set *The Bubble* (2006), has a title that refers to the coastal city’s insularity from the effects of war and a more stringent religious Judaism. Tel Aviv works as a central meeting ground for the Pfeffermans in the fourth season, as, akin to that city, the show’s subjects are not religiously observant. That secularity is communicated with one of Maura’s first lines in Tel Aviv during “Pinkwashing Machine,” where she exclaims that there are “not as many yarmulkes as you may think,” referring to the skullcaps worn by religious Jews.

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Furthermore, that ease with which a spectator may mistake Los Angeles for Tel Aviv also feeds into the campaigns of hasbara; the fusing of Israel and the United States tightens the bind, and the bond, between the two nations. This becomes more emphatic in the numerous times during the fourth season when the Pfeffermans concoct similes that show how closely the Israeli scenes and atmospheres they encounter mirror places they know more intimately. For instance, during “I Never Promised You a Promised Land” (episode six), Maura’s son Josh (Jay Duplass) says, “I feel like we’re in Venice Beach right now” as he walks through a Jerusalem market. Meanwhile, during her taxi ride into Tel Aviv during “Pinkwashing Machine,” Ali states that what she sees out from her window “looks like L.A.” Other comparisons – Jerusalem’s Western Wall is a tourist attraction that Sarah Pfefferman (Amy Landecker) describes as an “Orthodox Jewish Disneyland,” for instance – tether associations between a foreign land and spaces that American audiences can envision clearly. Yet, one point of resistance comes from Ali’s arrival in Ramallah, where she exclaims that a young adult-friendly café reminds her of Brooklyn. This is a significant gesture to deconstruct, and make relatable, the everyday experience of Palestinians to U.S. audiences who, as Ali claims, are used to seeing the Occupied Territories as hotbeds of violence and strife.



Josh Pfefferman (Jay Duplass) shops at a market in the Old City of Jerusalem. “I feel like we’re in Venice Beach right now,” he remarks.



Upon the family’s arrival at the Western Wall, Sarah Pfefferman (Amy Landecker, centre) deems the space an “Orthodox Jewish Disneyland,” tethering associations between Israel and the United States.





Upon arriving at a café with Lyfe in Ramallah, Ali remarks that the space reminds her of Brooklyn.



The scene at the Ramallah café helps to make relatable the everyday experience of Palestinians, deconstructing the typical image of the Occupied West Bank as a place of strife, violence, and economic ruin.

Meanwhile, one endearing parallel between the two countries is the continual space for Pfefferman family privilege. Moshe Pfefferman, Maura’s long-lost father, whose reunion with the protagonist becomes a major subplot during the fourth season, resides in a cushy beach house along the Mediterranean coastline. (In the fourth episode, “Cool Guy,” Ali reacts with surprise that Moshe “lives like a

Malibu Jew.”) Both Moshe and Maura’s homes position them with an upper-class elite society, while the aesthetics of the spaces – both have an abundance of natural light and a close proximity to the beach – correlate the wealth and status of the two characters.

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| <p>Upon seeing the layout of Moshe’s home along the coast, Ali remarks that he “lives like a Malibu Jew.” His home, like the old Pfefferman house, positions Moshe with an upper-class elite society.</p> | <p>The Pfefferman house in the Pacific Palisades, surrounded by greenery and natural light, comparable to the Eden of Moshe’s seaside property.</p> |

This parallel was a point of criticism for Andrew Silow-Carroll, then-editor in chief of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, who wrote that the fourth season

“plays it safe... soothing the pro-Israel crowd with a portrait of a cool, bourgeois Israel that feels like home even to Diaspora Jews as disaffected as the Pfeffermans” (*Jewish Telegraphic Agency*). [[open works cited page in new tab](#)]

Moving across the Partition

In “Pinkwashing Machine,” the narrative focuses on Ali’s education about the occupation from various Palestinians in Ramallah, with much of the episode set on a farm belonging to the family of a young woman named Janan. As staff writer Jenny Singer observed in *The Forward*, these scenes on Janan’s farm use many of the same tactics as hasbara campaigns, although the aim is reversed; here, it is to inform Americans of Israeli human rights abuses. As Singer observes, the episode’s “utopia of farming and collective living on land the Israeli government has clearly tried to reclaim” evokes visual and thematic parallels to the kibbutz – communal, agricultural-based settlements in Israel settled by Jews during the early-to-mid 20th century (*The Forward*). Furthermore, through enlisting a cast of young and attractive progressives to initiate conversation about Palestinian human rights to an American consciousness, Soloway “utilizes every weapon in the hasbara artillery that is usually used to gain the allegiance of Jewish children for Israel” (*The Forward*).



The dinner at Janan’s farm in the West Bank evokes, according to *The Forward*’s Jenny Singer, a “utopia of farming and collective living on land” that recalls the Israeli kibbutz.



An idealized Palestine: young, attractive,

These episodes’ glimpses of queer anti-Occupation activists are an incursion into a kind of political resistance that is seldom examined in U.S. film and television. The season examines, albeit briefly, the concerns of two politically engaged, queer women (Ali and Lyfe), and a queer Palestinian man, Hussen (played by Karim Saleh), who is detained by police at the Qalandiyah checkpoint between the West Bank and Israel in the episode “Desert Eagle.” These characters challenge the portrayal of Palestinian society as homophobic and confront the hasbara claim that Israel is a haven for LGBTQ+ communities. Nevertheless, these peripheral Palestinian characters do not receive much screen time to offer perspectives related to their national or queer identities, and this lack of interest in their lives beyond their superficial sociopolitical concerns is troubling. The marginalization of their voices, meanwhile, fits with a dominant, colonial narrative that LGBTQ Palestinians are “impossible subjects” that are too rarely seen in media-oriented contexts (Moussa 18).

politically-active progressives discussing the realities of the Occupation, helping the medicine of geopolitical debate go down more easily.

Hussen's subplot in "Desert Eagle" is thorny: the episode humanizes him while rendering him as a passive subject, controlled by the whims of Israeli border security. He gets a short dialogue scene with Ali, on their way to the Qalandiyah checkpoint, where he recounts how nervous his mother became when Israel built the apartheid wall, partitioning the country from the West Bank. However, in the following scene, Hussen is lost in the throng of Palestinians aching to cross the checkpoint and reach the Israeli side.



Hussen (Karim Saleh, left) embraces his boyfriend before driving Ali to the Qalandiyah checkpoint. His identity as a queer Palestinian makes him an "impossible subject," rarely viewed in a Western context.



Ali and Hussen head to the checkpoint. He is briefly humanized in this short scene before Israeli border security renders him as a passive subject.



Hussen tells Ali that he will see her on the other side of the barrier; however, this is their last point of contact.



Alongside spaces like the Western Wall, this checkpoint between Israel and the West Bank (which Ali passes through with relative ease) literalizes themes of barriers, borders, and binaries.



This sequence from "Desert Eagle," directed by Andrea Arnold, employs jump cuts to stick with Ali's unsettled state-of-mind in this alien space.






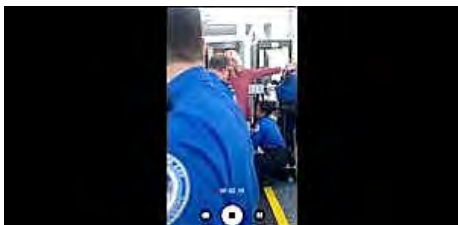
Ali is helpless as Israeli officers detain Hussen. The reason behind his detainment is unclear.



The sequence inside the secure walls of the checkpoint, where Ali realizes that Hussen is being ushered away by security personnel (for reasons unclear to the viewer), is told from her lens. Episode director Andrea Arnold introduces a jagged, off-kilter rhythm to the editing as Ali crosses through the checkpoint: the character becomes disoriented as she notices a soldier grabbing Hussen and taking him to a space Ali cannot see from the other side of the glass partition. This episode focuses on the crossing of borders and barriers, highlighting the ease with which a U.S. tourist with the proper documentation can access space in Israel that is denied to someone with more urgent claims in that territory.

Transparent explores the dangers of bodies moving through space, which disturb Ali. Unlike the airport security scene with Maura in a previous episode, Ali does not take out her smartphone to record an injustice happening with Hussen in front of her.

A useful parallel to comprehend, introduced by comparative literature and Middle East studies professor Gil Hochberg, is between the checkpoint and the closet. The former is a divide that needs to be crossed, “a meeting point of sorts between the scrutinizing gaze of the state and the bodies put under surveillance,” which confronts a position that is reminiscent of queer marginalization (Hochberg 584). While the details behind Hussen’s detainment by Israeli authorities are unclear, that the series introduces Hussen as a gay man prods at the argument that the nation-state is more tolerant of queer identities. Unable to pass through a fraught, emotional space, the episode mirrors the closing scene of the season’s second episode, “Groin Anomaly,” where Maura is ensnared by Los Angeles airport security due to a “discrepancy” in the body scanner.

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| <p>Purple hues and Ali’s outstretched arms signify the freedom with which she approaches airport security in Los Angeles, a stark juxtaposition to the later scene at the Qalandiyah checkpoint.</p> | <p>A defiant Ali takes out her smartphone to record Los Angeles airport security, who have to pat Maura down due to her “groin anomaly.”</p> |
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| <p>Maura, under the influence of a marijuana gummy, is unbothered by the flustered security guards, and is also amused by Ali’s indignation.</p> | <p>Ali records this transphobic airport “injustice” on her smartphone. She is more aware of how to respond here than at the Qalandiyah checkpoint.</p> |

There are two extreme differences between these sequences. At the Los Angeles airport, Maura – under the influence of a marijuana gummy – is unbothered by the flustered security guards; meanwhile, at the Israeli checkpoint, Hussen is forcefully taken away, against his will. The other disparity comes in Ali’s reaction to both circumstances. In Los Angeles, she promptly takes out her smartphone to film how airport security incompetently deals with a trans passenger and their failure to comprehend Maura’s humanity. However, in the space between the West Bank and Israel, Ali is perturbed and powerless: in the scene near the end of “Desert Eagle,” an employment of jump cuts places the viewer in her disoriented perspective as she watches Israeli officers detain Hussen.

As anthropology professor Jason Ritchie writes in an article about pinkwashing, the checkpoint works as a queer metaphor: it exists as a structure that regulates the movement of bodies through a space considered to be (hetero)normative for non-marginalized groups (623). He adds:

“Sometimes, the checkpoint works: queer Palestinians “answer” as expected and are rewarded with access to a given space. But even when the answer is wrong – when one refuses to act (or sound) ‘Israeli,’ for example – the checkpoint still *works*: identities are

checked, and the movement of bodies through space is regulated. The danger arises when the checkpoint *fails*, when a potential threat – what kind of threat and to whom, of course, is not always clear – slips through, and in those moments, the “anticipated” violence of the checkpoint becomes real.”

Although Ali initially decides to wait for Hussen outside the checkpoint, she soon abandons that space, hailing a taxi and hoping to reunite her with her family at the Dead Sea. Despite praising the season for introducing U.S. audiences to a more sympathetic and relatable view of Palestinians, artist and journalist Lior Zaltzman chastises Ali’s privilege in this episode:

“Soon, she will be wading into the Dead Sea, and that incident will be forgotten” (*Alma*).

Critic Lili Loofbourow also disparages the character’s selfishness in a review of *Transparent* for *The Week*. Referring to Ali’s inability to report that Hussen was detained at the checkpoint later in the season, she writes that the character’s “family crisis trumps their political one.” Ali’s experience in two separate security settings reinforces her distance from confronting political oppression, unlike her willingness to expose transphobia at the L.A. airport.



A poignant moment between mother and daughter allows Ali to open up about the agitation she feels, as a queer woman in the Holy Land who doesn’t seem to be entirely comfortable in her own body.

Beyond exploring Ali’s relationship with the State of Israel and her Jewish privilege, *Transparent*’s fourth season also investigates her shifting queer identity. During the seventh episode, “Babar the Horrible,” Ali decides to abandon her family, only days into their “all expenses paid” trip with Moshe around the Holy Land, and make her way back to Ramallah to spend more time with Lyfe and the other activists. Sitting against a white wall in an Israeli settlement, Ali has a poignant discussion with Maura:

“ALI: I don’t feel right. I don’t feel good.

MAURA: [*grasping Ali’s hand*] I understand. I felt that way, agitated.

I’d be invited places, I didn’t know if I would show up... I understand.

ALI: I just don’t feel good in my body. I don’t... I don’t feel *in* my body.

MAURA: Do you think you’re trans?

ALI: [*Laughs*] ... I don’t know. I don’t know that I feel like a woman, whatever that means.



Ali is held back by a partition that separates men and women congregating at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Ali’s discomfort and her reluctance to identify with a gender rejects traditional binaries. It is significant that these discoveries obtain a voice within a country widely associated with Jewish spiritualism, as it provides an outlet to investigate the intersection between trans and Jewish identities. A collection of personal and spiritually-themed essays, entitled *Balancing on the Mechitza* and edited by Noach Dzmura, has in its title the Hebrew word for barrier – although it is more commonly known as the partition that separates men and women in an Orthodox synagogue. Some who transition between genders will hop to the other side of the mechitza; here, Ali is trying to navigate her emotions, which are even more unsettled in a country where so much of sociopolitical life is divided.

As television critic Kathryn VanArendonk considers, it makes sense that the fourth season focuses more on Ali’s enlightenment, as she

“has always been the chosen one... the child who feels the spiritual connection to the Pfefferman ancestors [throughout *Transparent*]” (*Vulture*).

Nevertheless, the incident that helps to spawn Ali’s struggle with figuring out her gender identity has to do with discovering, in “Cool Guy,” that she and Maura are the descendants of a transgender woman. Ali’s admission to her transgender



From her side of the partition, Ali sees how the space granted to men at the Western Wall is far vaster than the area cordoned to women.



Subtly defiant, Ali dons a yarmulke and crosses toward the opposite side of the mechitza.

parent (in the aforementioned dialogue) comes shortly after the final scene in “I Never Promised You a Promised Land,” which features a combative Ali arguing with Moshe, other members of the Pfefferman family, and the security guard accompanying them on their bus tour around the country. With the exception of a quick retort from Maura, Ali is the lone voice of dissent against Israeli settler-colonialism, where she voices her opposition to the idea that Israel was “virgin land.” During the tense bus ride to Jerusalem, she blusters, partly to herself,

“Arabs and Jews... blacks and whites, men and women, a fucking binary everywhere you look, screwing things up.”

That feeling of social outrage translates to more emphatic action when Ali arrives at the Western Wall, one of Judaism’s holiest sites, and notices that the wall space granted to men is far vaster than the area cordoned to visiting women. As VanArendonk writes,

“The [Western] Wall is Ali’s nightmare of borders and binaries made almost comically literal” (*Vulture*).

From the more compressed women’s area, Ali walks toward the partition and sees men – many of whom are wearing traditional religious garb – dancing and rejoicing. The episode portrays that exuberance on the male side as existing in sharp juxtaposition to the mood on the other side of the mechitza, where women are praying solemnly. The youngest Pfefferman then decides to put her hair in a bun, don a yarmulke, and enter the men’s side, where she attracts no attention while passing as a different gender.

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Ali's traversal of this holy space connects back to the Torah chapter from the character's bat mitzvah, referenced in a previous season of *Transparent*.



After returning to Janan's farm, Ali finds an empty house. Several makeshift structures around it, as well as its inhabitants, have vanished.



The Pfeffermans, guests of Moshe on an all-expenses-paid bus trip through Israel, can traverse Israel's checkpoints with ease. In this scene, the bus has stopped in front of a

The ease with which Ali crosses borders is a privilege, as well, when she travels between Israeli and the occupied West Bank. Her traversal of this holy space also connects with a previous season of *Transparent*: in flashbacks, it is revealed that the Torah chapter Ali is to read at her bat mitzvah is “Lech-Lecha,” from the book of Genesis, named after God’s command to Abraham to leave his birthplace and go to the land of Canaan, or what is now Israel. Her arrival in Israel becomes a space for this diaspora Jew to ponder these frustrations, since the concept of diaspora

“should be understood as an internal construction, a relational and fluid understanding of identity in constant negotiation between the individual and the culture in which she resides” (Moss 85). [[open works cited page in new tab](#)]

Meanwhile, that her discomfort and confusion about her gender identity is loosened during her traversal of the mechtiza, in a space associated with religious sanctity, has an aspect of Godliness to it. As transgender author Joy Ladin writes, her own identity allows for a kinship with the Lord, who transcends traditional categories of gender (54). As Ladin claims:

“My approach to trans theology – the use of transgender perspectives to develop “a new understanding of God” – is based on the sense that the difficulties transgender people face in being visible and intelligible in a world based on binary gender offer useful analogies for understanding God’s difficulties in being visible and intelligible in a world based on human categories that God does not, and cannot, fit (56).”

During “House Call,” the season finale, Ali decides to remain in the West Bank. However, after returning to the camp outside Ramallah where she stayed earlier in the season, she finds that the house is empty and several temporary structures around it have vanished. Ali is now the character without a home of her own. In her last shot of the fourth season, Ali is gazing past the camera, with a look of worry on her face, sitting in a makeshift shelter she has recently built. She is stateless, in a space she does not quite occupy, while residing in a body she is still trying to figure out.

The Pfeffermans as the “chosen family”

In conjunction with Ali’s emotional quests, the Pfefferman family’s time in Israel features them wandering through tourist-friendly spaces where they contend with contemporary anxieties. Although this essay could elaborate on other subplots involving commitment issues involving Josh and Sarah Pfefferman, there will instead be a stronger focus on themes related to the family’s religious and financial privilege. The Pfeffermans’ status as Jewish Americans permits them to traverse Israel’s borders and checkpoints with ease, such as moving into spaces like settlement towns in the seventh episode. Moreover, the plush tour bus that Moshe rents for the cross-country tour with his long-lost relatives cushions their sense of security. The fourth season shows the characters enacting their white privilege, an aspect of the series that has received aforementioned criticism from writers like Amy Villarejo. In the fourth season, it is only Ali who navigates spaces, like the Occupied West Bank, that are unfamiliar; the rest of her family

settlement town. The plush tour bus where the family sits (off camera) cushions their sense of security in the Holy Land.



Transparent's opening titles sequence, for the fourth season, incorporates aspects of the Israeli landscape through clips of the Holy Land. The image of religious Jews praying at Jerusalem's Western Wall foreshadows this setting's significance.

remains confined to their Jewish bubble.

That mastery over the land is reflected in the show's updated opening credits sequence, which, in its fourth season, incorporates aspects of the Israeli landscape through images of the Holy Land. These clips include familiar tourist iconography: people riding camels, religious Jews praying at the Western Wall, a soldier overlooking an empty beach. Fascinatingly, this introductory theme keeps with the aesthetic of the previous three seasons, which derived many of its images from archival films and video recordings. The transference of the Israeli iconography onto fuzzy visuals dates the images to feel as if they were taken during the mid-to-late 20th century. During the opening credits, we see a young Jewish woman, posing with her hand in the air and gesturing while touring the Old City of Jerusalem, as well as a group of Jewish settlers (likely *kibbutzniks*) standing in a circle and holding hands. Both of these brief vignettes are among the clips that suggest an ownership of the land. Meanwhile, the sharp juxtaposition between the visual quality of these clips to the cleanly digital look of the rest of *Transparent* demonstrate a schism between Israeli myth (in the filmed images from decades ago) and a more complex geopolitical reality.



A young woman rides a camel through the streets of Israel in *Transparent's* opening titles sequence. Camel riding is a popular tourist activity in the Middle East.



The fuzzy aesthetics of the opening credits dates the images to feel as if they were home movies taken during the mid-to-late 20th century, which brings to mind the length of Israel's Occupation.

The sight of Israel in the opening credits of the first episode foreshadows the setting for much of the coming season, especially since Israel was seldom mentioned during *Transparent's* first three seasons. Yet it feels inevitable that a show that engages with so many Jewish traditions and sacred customs, as chronicled extensively by Jewish studies scholar Roberta Rosenberg, finds its way to the Holy Land; as she explains,

“Without access to rituals and spiritual metanarratives, Soloway's characters might seriously lose their way and succumb to despair” (79).

Soloway even explained in an interview on NPR's *Fresh Air* about the significance of featuring so much spiritual content in a series focused on a cocoon of mostly secular Jews: it makes more prominent their journey of evolution, from pain and struggle to fulfillment and tranquility (Rosenberg 97).

The discussion of binaries in the aforementioned bus-set scene from “I Never Promised You a Promised Land,” where Ali squabbles with pro-Zionist voices on many sides, has earned some criticism from television critics. Kathryn VanArendonk explains that the scene has “each character taking a stance mostly for the purpose of representing the debate.” The security guard, for instance, unleashes a harmful talking point that the word ‘Palestinian’ is “made up.” Meanwhile, when Ali retorts that “one oppression does not justify another,” referring to the Holocaust, Bryna (her aunt) and Shelly (her mother) combat that perspective, explaining that Israel was the only place where Jews could go for



A young woman poses with her hand in the air, gesturing while touring the Old City of Jerusalem. The image evokes an ownership of the Holy Land.



Ali feels isolated from her family, especially during a conversation about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the tour bus.



The masculine, right-leaning security guard who spars with Ali on the tour bus, offers the spurious assertion that the word 'Palestinian' is "made up."



Maura chooses not to engage in the conversation. Her neutral presence here minimizes the intersectionality between queerness and anti-Occupation activism, which is showcased in other episodes.

refuge in the wake of that annihilation. Unfortunately, Maura does not participate much in the conversation to support Ali's social justice crusade, instead opining that a conversation may be "too complicated for a bus ride."

Reflecting on the tense conversation between Ali and older members of her family on the bus ride to Jerusalem, the *Jewish Journal's* Esther D. Kustanowitz broaches how the Israel-Palestine conflict is, among many U.S. Jews, a contentious topic – especially between the generations. As she explains:

"These scenes paint an unbridgeable gap: The previous generation is living in the past, unable to step away from its narrative to see any negative outcome, and the younger generation is passionate about Palestinian rights as part of an overall quest for justice but divorced from the region's history as context. Each perspective sees no other choice; each perspective has its valid points and its blindnesses, all forged in history and emotion, with no room for nuance or compassion."

The decision by *Transparent's* writing staff – Bridget Bedard is the credited screenwriter for this episode – to use Maura as a mostly neutral presence regarding discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict minimizes the intersectionality between queerness and anti-Occupation activism that was showcased in other episodes. Maura also reveals to the Pfeffermans, while they float in the Dead Sea in "They Is on the Way," that Ali is going through an identity crisis – even though Maura also claims that Ali wasn't initially comfortable sharing these details with them before she departed the family's tour of Israel. This casual dismissal of her daughter's complicated experience – an outing, sans permission – is a largely questionable choice, especially for a character who had been in the closet for much of her life.

Furthermore, although Maura's acceptance into a conference, where she is to give a keynote address, precipitates the Pfeffermans' travel plans, it is unremarked (even by Ali) that Maura's decision to present her academic work in Israel disregards the current academic boycott there. Similar to the way that Tambor's casting as Maura struck LGBTQ critics as tone-deaf – in the words of one activist, "profiting off trans experience and trans pain" – Maura's silence toward Palestinian human rights abuses adds to the program's problematic, thorny queer politics (Soloway 78).

Conclusion: Is everything alright?

In Amy Villarejo's analysis of *Transparent*, the television scholar locates soft rock music from the 1970s and 1980s as one of the ways the show organizes itself temporally (13). An audio cue of fascination within the fourth season is a record of the Broadway cast recording of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, most specifically the song "Everything's Alright." The soothing anthem provides the backdrop to a flashback of a pregnant Shelly (about to give birth to Ali) in "Groin Anomaly"; later, it is the choice for a sing-a-long between Maura, Shelly, and Maura's new boyfriend, Donald, as the final episode transitions to the closing credits.

The reassurance promised by that musical theatre classic is at odds with *Transparent's* legacy on the small screen. In November 2017, as the beginning of the #MeToo movement shook the foundations of the U.S. film and television industry, three women, including *Transparent* cast member Trace Lysette, accused Tambor of sexual misconduct. In sharp juxtaposition to the relaxed final moment involving a content Maura, singing a Broadway favorite with two of her



Maura sits with her boyfriend, ex-wife, and others as they toast and then sing along to "Everything's Alright" from the *Jesus Christ Superstar* soundtrack. It is a happy ending to the character, who would not return for the series finale.



At the end of *Transparent's* fourth season, Ali is stateless, while residing in a body she is still trying to figure out.

loves, the series did not move forward with its protagonist. In September 2019, Amazon premiered a two-hour musical episode – the series finale – without its headlining, Emmy-winning star. Due to Maura's absence from the series moving forward, it is fitting that *Transparent's* protagonist ended her arc with a happy ending, one that registers with the optimistic conclusions for the Pfefferman family at the end of each season.

Regardless, there is an incongruity with the final moments of the fourth season; as Maura sings along to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Ali is still in Israel, underneath a makeshift shelter, looking pained and worried at what may have happened to the activists with whom she bonded a few days earlier. While Maura has found comfort from learning about her ancestral history during the trip, Ali is uneasy. Similarly, their connection with Israeli has been significantly different: the matriarch does not think much about the conflict, as the episodes reveal, while Ali struggles to figure out how best to contribute to social justice movements in the region. Both are characters grappling with their otherness, although one is wrapped in homely comforts of privilege and the other is figuring out how to, literally, build her own home.

This mixed messaging emblemizes both *Transparent's* complicated stance between mainstream and radical left-wing politics in relation to the Israeli occupation, its dual alignment with both Israeli and Palestinian stories exposing the difficulty of representing resistant perspectives on that Middle East conflict in U.S. mass media. This regional discord persists as a taboo on the small screen, despite the presence of critically-acclaimed series about millennial, left-leaning American Jews – most of whom are women – such as *Broad City* (featuring Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson), *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (Rachel Bloom), and *Russian Doll* (Natasha Lyonne). These irreverent comedies do not elide their heroines' Jewish heritage, making occasional references to Jewish holidays and customs (such as keeping kosher, or "sitting shiva" during a process of bereavement).

But direct references to Israeli politics are near-absent. One exception is the season three finale of *Broad City*, "Jews on a Plane," where Glazer and Jacobson, playing fictionalized versions of themselves, are on a flight to Israel as part of a "Birthmark" contingent. This is a not-so-veiled parody of Birthright, an all-expenses-paid trip for Jews between the ages of 18 and 26 to the Holy Land, which is devoted to fostering young Jews' attachment to Israel. The comic shenanigans, which concludes with Ilana and Abbi deciding promptly to return "home" to New York City, challenges the belief that Israel is the natural Jewish homeland. Aside from pointed jokes about the matching of young, single Jews in amorous partnerships on these trips, this episode avoids more thorough critiques of Birthright, such as the way trips can skew certain narratives of Israel's history to ignore Palestinian claims.

Despite its production's adjustments to appease a cultural boycott and the efforts

to bring attention and visibility to queer anti-Occupation activists and the harsh realities of life in the West Bank, *Transparent's* fourth season missed various opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue about Israel's human rights abuses. As Lili Loofbourow concludes, in her criticism of the season in *The Week*,

“It takeschutzpah to take your fictional family to the Middle East, recognize the region's complexities, and still make the show all about them.”

The writers' concern for the treatment of Palestinians comes through in refreshing, if sometimes didactic moments set in the West Bank, and the show's alignment with Ali's progressive bona fides could help that message register with audiences. Regardless, *Transparent's* incursions into examining the intersectionality of queer resistance in Israel-Palestine were sometimes potent and sometimes perfunctory, only sporadically giving activist voices in the Promised Land the promised treatment of meaningful anti-Occupation perspectives.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Queen Latifah plays the starring role in *Bessie*, a 2015 HBO biopic about the life of bisexual blues singer Bessie Smith.



On stage at the 2016 GLAAD media awards, Latifah accepts an award for her role in *Bessie* and makes characteristically evasive remarks about her own sexuality.

Living out loud: Queen Latifah and Black queer television production

by [Lauren Herold](#)

At the 2016 GLAAD Media Awards, Dee Rees' biopic *Bessie* (HBO, 2015) won the award for Outstanding TV Movie or Limited Series. Queen Latifah, who plays bisexual[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Empress of Blues Bessie Smith in the titular role, received the award on stage on behalf of the film. Latifah begins her acceptance speech by thanking GLAAD, her production team, Rees, the cast, and HBO for their support of the project. She continues:

“When I’m standing here and I receive something like this, I really think about my cousins, and my aunts, and my family members who are, uh, what’s the words again, the letters again? I’m just playing. My cousins who are gay, who are lesbians, who are questioning, who raised me, who taught me to be who I am, the strong woman you see standing in front of you today. I want to dedicate this to my aunt Lita, who was my inspiration for a character named Cleo I played in *Set it Off*. She was also my inspiration for my life. She taught me how to really be a loved person. I can’t imagine that she wouldn’t be able to just live her life in every aspect of her life.”[2]

Queen Latifah, a prolific African American actress, hip-hop artist, media producer, and talk show host, has been dogged by rumors and speculation about her sexuality for decades. In this speech, Latifah feigns unfamiliarity with the meaning of the letters in the LGBTQ acronym, but goes on to dedicate the award to her aunt, whose life inspired her role as an iconic butch lesbian character in *Set it Off* (1995). Latifah affirms that her aunt serves as an inspiration in her daily life as well, but makes no reference to specificities of her personal life beyond this. Yet a 2012 appearance at a gay pride festival, as well as numerous paparazzi photographs of Latifah with female partners, have all but “confirmed” Latifah’s lesbian identity for the press and for many of her fans.[3] Latifah herself has never confirmed or denied the rumors—she is notoriously private about the romantic and sexual details of her life. As exemplified in her speech at the GLAAD Awards, Latifah frequently expresses support for LGBTQ rights but consistently uses evasive language when referring to any personal relationship to the community.

This article considers Queen Latifah’s role as an influential producer in the contemporary film and television industry, and in particular her participation in a variety of television projects that evoke the experiences of LGBTQ people. Despite the fact the Latifah is a prolific producer and actress, there is little scholarship dedicated to an analysis of her work.[4] Black female stardom is undertheorized. As Miriam Petty argues,

“the layered and polysemic significance of Black performers...have



Latifah has played a number of significant LGBTQ characters, including her role as Cleo in *Set it Off* (1996).

often been discounted and dismissed as marginal.”[5]

The dearth in media studies scholarship about Latifah is in part symptomatic of a larger gap in the field—media studies has yet to account for the careers of Black women in television production.[6] Petty suggests that it requires “fundamental shifts in perspective and framing” to explore how racial and gender ideologies impact the historical significance of African American film stars.[7] Centering Latifah’s film and television work requires a similar reframing, a shift in perspective that acknowledges her influence in media production.

I draw upon work in production studies to analyze Latifah’s contributions to her LGBTQ media projects, specifically her starring roles in *Bessie* and NBC’s 2015 televised production *The Wiz Live!*. As Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks, and John Caldwell argue, production studies investigates “the lived realities of people involved in media production as the subjects for theorizing production as culture.”[8] This approach asks,

“How do media producers represent themselves given the paradoxical importance of media in society? How do we, as researchers, then represent those varied and contested representations?”[9]

Production studies looks both to the lived experiences of producers as well as the industry and the texts themselves to understand how meaning is produced in a cultural object.

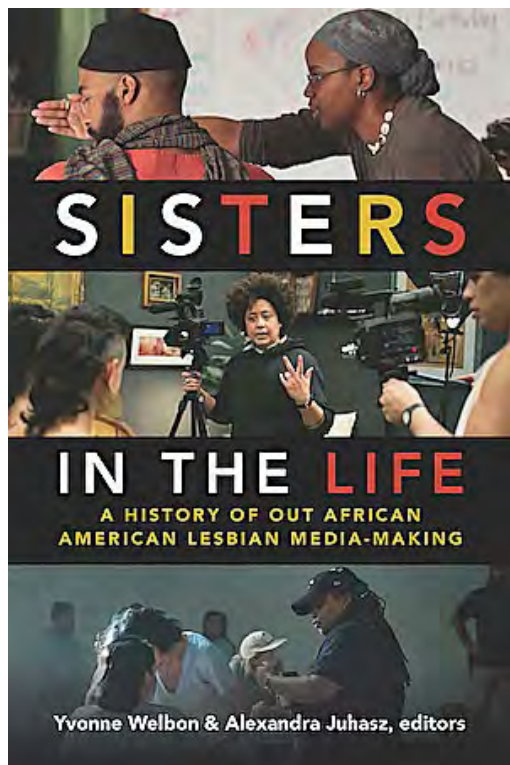


NBC’s 2015 live televised musical production, *The Wiz Live!*, cast Latifah as the Wiz, a role typically given to male actors.

Because Latifah lives much of her life outside of the public eye, it is difficult to argue that her lived experiences shape her queer projects. The work of out LGBTQ media creators is central to queer production studies. Alfred Martin asserts,

“queer production studies makes space for queers to use entrepreneurial methods to create media that reflect their experiences...queer production studies is invested in the many facets of queer production *and* the production of queerness.”[10]

For queer production studies in particular, it is essential to analyze how the genders and sexualities of particular producers inform the production process as well as how LGBTQ identities are produced via particular industrial and cultural practices. Patricia White’s analysis of the career of Black lesbian film and television producer Angela Robinson provides a good example. Exploring



The groundbreaking anthology *Sisters in the Life: An Anthology of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making* makes outness central to the study of queer media production.

Robinson's varied projects, White examines how Robinson "includes queer and black subcultural styles and sensibilities in her mainstream work through...genre codes and references." [11] Robinson's outness is central to the argument of this piece—in fact, it is central to all of the essays in the anthology *Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making*, in which the chapter is published. Queen Latifah is absent from this anthology, and other work in queer production studies, because she avoids identifying herself within the queer community. I suggest here that the emphasis on outness in queer production studies risks neglecting the cultural significance of queer work by more private creators. More significantly, the emphasis on out LGBTQ creators in this scholarship risks reinscribing what Eve Sedgwick calls the "epistemology of the closet," which implicitly suggests that we must come to know the sexuality of these producers in order to analyze their work. [12]

Like many scholars, I take seriously the political and ethical implications of "outing" a celebrity, and so I make no argument with regard to Latifah's sexuality. As Jimmy Draper argues, news and entertainment media often applies a "lens of detection" to sexually ambiguous celebrities, a lens which encourages audiences "to make sense of nonnormative performances of self through hegemonic gender norms" and therefore "limits the possibilities for media representations to challenge...dominant notions of sexuality." [13] Similarly, Lynne Joyrich argues that a "hermeneutic of suspicion" structures narratives of televisual (homo)sexuality, inviting viewers to "know" the queerness of a character via systems of detection that reinforce the oppressive logic of the closet. [14] C. Riley Snorton extends these analyses to racialized celebrities, asserting that African American celebrity sexuality exists within a "glass closet"...marked by hypervisibility and confinement, spectacle, and speculation." [15] Snorton holds that the closet is a "racist technology" that serves a regulatory function by reproducing the hypervisibility and hypersexualization of Black people. [16] To resist the lens of detection, a hermeneutic of suspicion, and the racist technology of the closet, I suggest that a celebrity's engagement queer cultural work warrants analysis whether or not the individual is publicly out as LGBTQ.

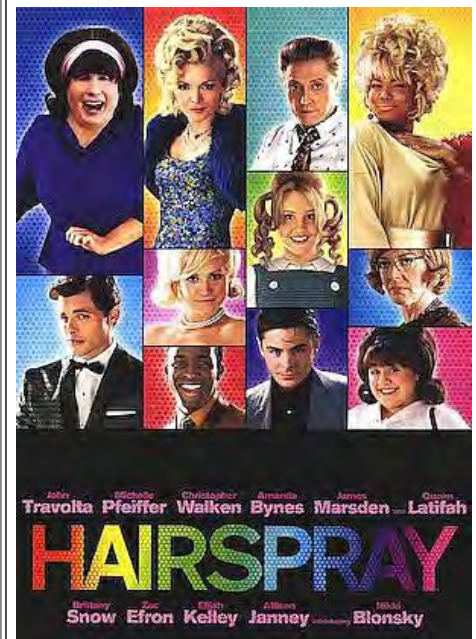
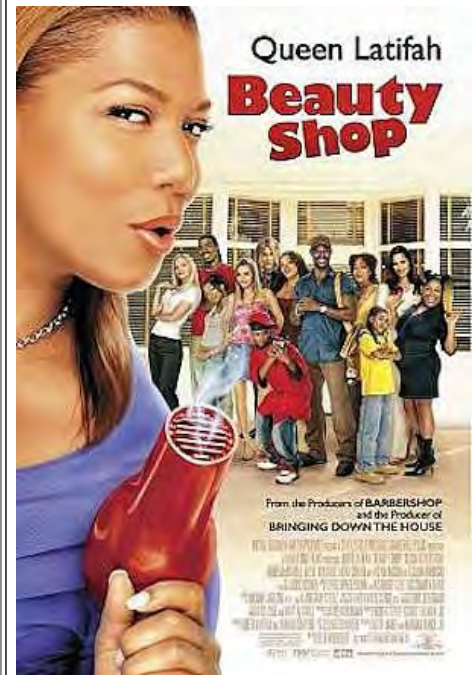
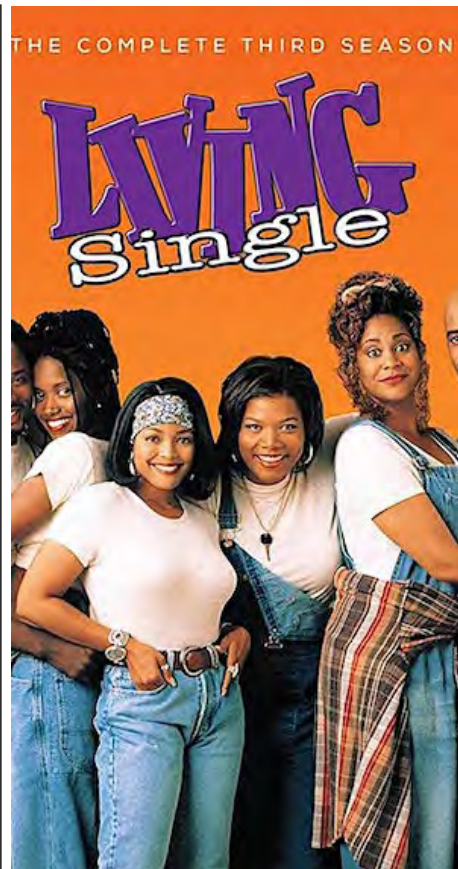
I first review Latifah's career and trace scholarly analysis of her music to demonstrate that critical attention to her media projects is currently lacking. I describe the production histories of both *Bessie* and *The Wiz Live!*, detailing Latifah's textual and extra-textual commitments to these projects as producer and/or star. I offer close readings of scenes from both *Bessie* and *The Wiz Live!*, providing a queer reading of Latifah's performances in each. I argue that Latifah's labor as star and/or producer demonstrates her commitment and contribution to Black queer cultural production. I finally discuss Latifah's privacy in relation to Ralina Joseph's concept of "strategic ambiguity," which identifies how Black women media makers carefully navigate sexism and racism in the industry. Employing the tools of strategic ambiguity, Latifah is able to evade gendered and racialized homophobia and maintain her market appeal to wide audiences, while simultaneously investing and starring in queer projects. Queen Latifah's evasiveness about her sexuality has likely stymied analysis of her queer cultural production, but an analysis of her career offers new insights into the study of LGBTQ television. It illuminates how stars can incorporate subcultural references into their work via production and performance, infusing commercial television projects with Black and queer history, community, and culture. I conclude by suggesting that queer media studies scholars resist reinscribing the epistemology

of the closet in our analyses. By applying concepts like strategic ambiguity to the lives of more private media producers, we can discuss their queer labor without relying on a public performance of non-normative sexuality in order to do so.

Queen Latifah: hip-hop artist, television producer, and queer media creator?

Born Dana Owens in Newark, New Jersey, Queen Latifah has been in the public eye since she released her first album *All Hail the Queen* in 1989 featuring her hit single “Ladies First.” A successful entrepreneur and businesswoman, Latifah has produced and/or starred in over 100 films and television shows over the past 30 years.[17]

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Queen Latifah has been a prominent figure in commercial film and television production for the past 30 years, starring in and producing a wide variety of projects, yet much of her work has yet to be accounted for in media studies scholarship.

This includes her breakout role on television as Khadijah James in Fox's *Living Single* (1993-1998) and her prominence in cinema that caters to the Black film market such as *Beauty Shop* (2005), as well as starring roles in big-budget Hollywood films including *Chicago* (2002), *Hairspray* (2007), *Valentine's Day*

(2010), and *Girls Trip* (2017). Latifah's production company, Flavor Unit Entertainment, has produced many of these projects. Latifah has additionally appeared over 290 times in interviews, award shows, and talk shows over the last two decades, including in her own series, *The Queen Latifah Show* (CBS, 2013-2014). A versatile performer, Latifah holds 54 soundtrack credits—she provides original music for many of the films and television series in which she stars. Latifah currently serves as executive producer for shows on Lifetime and MTV and a variety of film projects. Most recently, she held a regular role in Lee Daniels' series *Star* (Fox, 2016-2019) and guest starred in Ryan Murphy's Netflix series *Hollywood* (2020). According to a 2020 list, Latifah is one of the highest paid Black actresses in Hollywood.[18] She is the recipient of numerous prestigious titles, including a Grammy Award, an Emmy Award, a Golden Globe Award, two NAACP Image Awards, and three Screen Actors Guild Awards.

Despite her prolific career of film and television production, scholarship on Latifah predominantly focuses on her music career. Latifah figures prominently in Black feminist analysis of hip-hop and within hip-hop feminism, which analyze how Black women in hip-hop confront racism and misogyny. In these works, Queen Latifah is most often cited within a genealogy of Black women MCs and hip-hop artists, including Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, Foxy Brown, and Lil' Kim, who explore gender and racial politics in their music and lyrics. For example, Joan Morgan affirms,

“The keys that unlock the riches of contemporary Black female identity lie not in choosing Latifah over Lil' Kim, or even Foxy Brown over Salt-N-Pepa. They lie at the magical intersection where those contrary voices meet—the juncture where ‘truth’ is no longer Black and white but subtle, intriguing shades of gray.”[19]

Here Morgan mobilizes Latifah to formulate her provocative thesis about “fuckin’ with the grays”: that exploring the material contradictions of Black women’s lives and pleasures provides a theoretical framework for grappling with sexism and racism in hip-hop. For Morgan and other scholars, Queen Latifah’s work represents a significant contribution to Black feminist cultural production that embraces the nuances and contradictions held by women with multiple identities and desires.



While scholars have theorized about the intersections of queerness and hip-hop culture, Queen Latifah is largely absent from this literature. Much of this work builds off of the Black feminist/hip-hop feminist perspective to position hip-hop as a queer (non-normative) musical and artistic practice with radical potentialities. Or, as Jessica Pabón and Shanté Smalls assert, “feminist,’ ‘queer,’ and ‘hip hop’ are critical sites and methods of inquiry aimed at exposing and deconstructing intersectional structures of oppression.”[20] Contrary to hip-hop feminist work that celebrates Latifah’s music, this scholarship rejects Latifah’s career as heteronormative. For example, in Mecca Jamilah Sullivan’s piece, “Fat Mutha: Hip Hop’s Queer Corpulent Poetics,” Latifah figures as one of example in a lineage of hip-hop stars who “highlight the intersections of fatness, blackness, and queerness.”[21] Sullivan, however, focuses her analysis on out queer rappers from whom she can imagine a “fat future for queer hip hop.”[22] Sullivan does not present a detailed analysis of Latifah because she asserts that Latifah eschews “both queerness and fatness in favor of more heteronormative—and, arguably, more lucrative—presentations of coherent normative gender.”[23] As hinted in Sullivan’s article, it is likely that Latifah is “missing” from much of this scholarship because she declines to discuss her sexuality in public.



Latifah is similarly “missing” from queer media studies scholarship, likely because queer production studies centers the labor of *out* LGBTQ directors, writers, and

producers. As Alfred Martin writes, the production of Black queer television is dependent upon the existence of Black LGBTQ authors:

“While television authorship is undoubtedly contested and negotiated, the centrality of each of the writer’s identity cannot be ignored....writer’s individual autobiographies shape the ways the episodes developed.”[24]

Because the out queer author is so central to the scholarship, it is difficult to discuss queer production without acknowledging the sexuality of the producer or writer. This leaves a significant gap in the field: how can scholars examine the queer cultural production of a celebrity who keeps her sexual identity ambiguous? As I will discuss, Queen Latifah’s labor and political commitments shape the cultural work she produces, despite her decision not to name her sexuality.

A look at Latifah’s involvement in two unconventional television projects, *Bessie* and *The Wiz Live!*, demonstrates how she encodes Black queer cultural references into her work. Queer television studies typically analyzes the production and representation of LGBTQ characters in episodic sitcoms, serial dramas, and reality television. Taking a look at the queerness of television projects that exceed regularly scheduled broadcast and cable programming—in this case, a televisual biopic and an adaptation of a Broadway show—can expand our understanding of LGBTQ television beyond the standard programming of the commercial system to include cinematic television, live television, and “media events,” among others. Analyzing both Latifah’s role as producer and/or star in these projects, as well as her performance in each, I examine the significant role she plays in shaping the television projects she helps to produce.

Sororal authorship and the historical black queer past of *Bessie*

The creative collaboration between Latifah and Black lesbian director Dee Rees helped make the *Bessie* film a reality. *Bessie* was released on HBO in early 2015 but plans for a film about the life of Bessie Smith were in talks for a number of decades. The idea surfaced in the 1970s but never came to fruition; in the early 1990s, Columbia Pictures revived the idea and worked with biographer Chris Albertson and playwright Horton Foote to prepare a script.[25] Albertson suggested Queen Latifah, already an established hip-hop star and actress, to play the lead role—while she was interested, the financing for the project fell apart.[26] Fifteen years later, in 2009, producer Hallie Foote, who inherited the rights to the project from her late father, approached HBO about the project.[27] Rees, whose first feature-length film *Pariah* (2011) premiered to critical acclaim, signed on to direct *Bessie* in 2013.

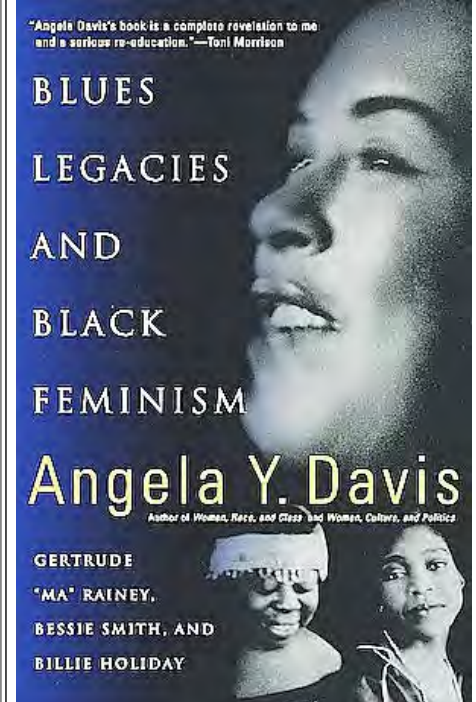
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Hip-hop feminist scholars explore the work of artists like Latifah, MC Lyte, and Salt-N-Pepa, who discuss racial and gender politics in their music and lyrics.



Latifah and Black lesbian filmmaker Dee Rees fostered a close creative partnership to produce *Bessie*, reflecting what Patricia White calls the “sororal model” of women’s independent film authorship.



Angela Davis’s *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* examines the careers of blues legends Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and Billie Holiday, mining their lyrics and performances for articulations of Black feminist consciousness.

Patricia White argues that women’s art cinema often features a “sororal model” of authorship evidenced by a “multiplicity” in the relationships between the filmmakers and the characters on screen.[28] The sororal model offers an alternative to the traditional understanding that a (typically male) auteur has complete creative control, instead highlighting the contributions of gender-diverse on and off-screen talent in the making of a film. I argue that *Bessie*



Bessie is one of only a handful of commercial films to feature a bisexual protagonist. Throughout the film, Bessie Smith has romantic and sexual relationships with both men and women on screen.



features this sororal model of authorship: Rees did much of the work to shape the narrative and thematic elements of *Bessie*, while Latifah provided financial support for the film and labored to produce a vocally and historically accurate performance of Bessie Smith's style and sexual expression.

In interviews, Rees has discussed the research that went into creating an historically accurate fictional world in *Bessie*. Rees relied heavily upon scholarship about this era—she calls Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* her “bible.” [29] The book, a canonical text in African American studies and gender studies, analyzes the music and lyrics of blues women to demonstrate how these songs “serve as a rich terrain for examining a historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities.” [30] Davis explicitly discusses the way Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey incorporated lesbian subtext into their songs. Prefiguring the lesbian cultural movement of the 1970s by half a century, Davis writes that Rainey and Smith “openly challenged the gender politics implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love relationships.” [31] With a closer look at *Bessie*, we can see how Rees and Latifah incorporate the spirit of resistance and resilience that Davis highlights in her book into the film.

Bessie fits amongst a group of films that critic Richard M. Breaux calls “Queer Black Cinema.” [32] Made by Black LGBTQ filmmakers, Queer Black Cinema explores the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality for Black LGBTQ subjects on screen. A number of these films focus on or reference the Harlem Renaissance because it was an “era of modernism, excess, and urban relocation [that] brought components of queer black culture out into the open.” [33] *Bessie*, which depicts Bessie Smith's fluid sexuality as well as the racism and sexism she experienced in the music industry, squarely fits within this growing body of films.

The Bessie Smith of *Bessie* is an emotionally complex and defiantly independent woman committed to retaining control of her performance style, musical routine, and choice of sexual partners. *Bessie* is one of only a handful of commercial films to feature a main character who has relationships with both men and women on screen. As Maria San Filippo argues, contemporary film and television are filled with “missed moments” that elide the bisexual potential of their protagonists. [34] *Bessie* features multiple instances of on-screen sex, in which Smith engages both romantically and physically with male and female partners. In the opening minutes of the film, in a bedroom scene at a boarding house, Smith and another woman (whom we later learn is her longtime lover Lucille) lie in bed kissing and giggling, expressing their affection and attraction towards one another. It eventually becomes clear that Smith and Lucille's relationship is non-monogamous; Smith flirts with other women and later develops relationships with men as well.

Black female characters in film and literature have historically been denied sexual complexity and erotic pleasure in order to establish their morality. As Lisa Thompson suggests, a performance of respectability politics for black women “relies heavily upon aggressive shielding of the body; concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence, and civility as a way to counter negative stereotypes.” [35] Thompson concludes that it is a Black feminist intervention to “prioritize women's sexual pleasure” in film and media. [36] *Bessie* is one such feminist intervention. Latifah's brazen expression of Bessie Smith's sexuality on screen interrupts a long lineage of desexualized, respectable Black female characters. The character's explicit queerness adds another layer of sexual complexity to the film. By including Smith's sexual relationships with both men and women in the diegesis of the film, *Bessie* highlights the oft-overlooked history



Ma Rainey (Mo'Nique) mentors Bessie Smith in the film. Rainey's drag king performance of "Prove It On Me Blues" reflects the queer content of its lyrics and emboldens Smith to become a more confident performer..

that Angela Davis helped to uncover: the significant role that Black queer women played in 1920s African American cultural production.

In addition to explicit depictions of queer sex and sexuality, *Bessie* features a queer mentoring relationship between Ma Rainey (Mo'Nique) and Smith, the latter honing her confidence and performance chops from the former. In one striking scene, Ma Rainey performs the song "Prove It On Me Blues" on stage wearing a top hat and tuxedo and sporting a cane. As Davis writes, the lyrics of this song are filled with lesbian subtext. [37] Rainey's performance embodies the lyrics: she struts around stage with a confident butch swagger, while reaction shots reveal Smith's joy and the crowd's delight. Rainey's highly stylized, commanding performance here allows her to embody a queer masculinity not typically socially sanctioned for Black women in the early 20th century.

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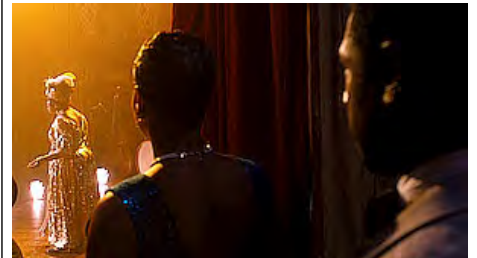
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Rainey commands the crowd during a performance of "Weepin' Women's Blues"...



... while Smith watches from the sidelines.



... Smith soon joins her on stage and the two sing hand-in-hand ...



... but then Smith steps in front of Rainey to command the attention of the audience. ...



... Rainey glares at Smith in the background, and later ends their creative partnership.

This drag king performance emboldens Smith. With Rainey's support of her talent and fluid sexuality, Smith soon comes into her own. In the next musical number on screen, Smith joins Rainey on stage in a small theater to perform the song "Weepin' Woman's Blues." At first Rainey holds the crowd's attention; she stands center stage in a gold dress and headpiece, swaying and singing while the audience claps in time. Smith stands nervously backstage until Rainey gestures for Smith to come join her. Hand in hand, the women sing in tandem, Smith providing the backup to Rainey's lead. Yet when Smith spots an encouraging face in the crowd, she raises her brows and steps in front of Rainey, stealing the spotlight. Spreading her arms wide, raising her shoulders, and closing her eyes to feel the emotion of the music, Smith finishes the song as a soloist. Her new confidence as well as her throaty, soulful singing voice seduce the crowd. Smith beams as the audience cries "Bessie!"—meanwhile, Rainey glares at her in the background. In the next scene, Rainey admonishes Smith for hogging the spotlight, which pushes Smith to quit the show and launch a solo career.

These scenes demonstrate the power of the queer sisterhood shared between Rainey and Smith, mirroring the sororal relationship between Rees and Latifah off screen. Rainey is a mentor and role model for Smith. While Smith eventually parts ways with Rainey's musical company, she is only able begin her own career after building the courage and confidence to do so under Rainey's guidance. Much later in the film, the women reunite to reminisce on their success. Despite their earlier competitiveness, a connection remains between them. *Bessie* may take creative license when highlighting the friendship between Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith—it is unclear if their relationship is historical fact or an invention of the film.[38] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Yet with this friendship, and with the matter-of-fact portrayal of Bessie Smith's intimate relationships, *Bessie* is able to depict the blues women that Davis describes: resilient, independent, and defiant



Smith and Rainey reunite towards the end of the film. Rainey once again serves as a mentor to Smith, guiding her through a difficult time in her personal life and career.

of the institutional and interpersonal homophobia, sexism, and racism they encountered.

Latifah's labor as star and producer is evident in her performance. In a review of the film, critic Judith Smith positions Latifah as the second auteur of this project. She writes,

"[Latifah] worked on mastering Bessie Smith's musical range, switching from gospel to blues in the same song, her phrasing, her pronunciation, as well as her extraordinarily assertive and glowing mode of performance." [39]

An accomplished musical artist, Latifah's vocal range and charismatic performance help shape the story of the film. In addition to her on screen performance, Latifah's company Flavor Unit Entertainment produced the film. In an interview with NPR, Latifah shared that *Bessie* was her passion project for twenty years:

"I'm so thankful that *this* happened at *this* time with *this* woman I'm sitting across from [gestures to director Dee Rees], who had a vision that was something I could apply myself to and sink myself into at this time with this life experience." [40]

Latifah's labor in this project is emblematic of the "do-it-yourself" approach typical to marginal production cultures; as Candace Moore suggests, Black lesbian media makers hold "a sense of shared responsibility for the identity representations that make it to screen" and so work together to make the content they want to see in the world because no one else will do it for them. [41]

Latifah similarly has a multi-layered relationship with the character she plays on screen. *Bessie's* Bessie Smith acts as an character-surrogate for Latifah; both women find success in musical industries dominated by men, compose lyrics discussing racial and gendered oppression, and (seemingly) express alternative sexualities. In the same interview, Latifah notes,

"I've seen so many things in Bessie's life that really mirrored mine." [42]

The creation of a character "alter ego" is a common tactic of minority media authorship; as Janet Staiger argues, the alter-ego allows the author to "[take] up a subsidiary character in a text to speak for the author or...[place] a subordinated cultural figure into the lead role." [43] Through the creation of an alter-ego, Staiger suggests that marginalized media creators can express non-dominant political viewpoints and underrepresented life experiences on screen. In this case, the Bessie Smith character can express aspects of Latifah's life that she perhaps decides not to disclose to the press.

The complex relationship between Queen Latifah and the character she plays on screen deepens the multiplicity of the authorship of the film. The uncanny connections between director, star, and character in *Bessie* open up possibilities for considering how Rees and Latifah's sororal partnership influenced the film. Yet when asked about the similarities between her life and Bessie Smith's story, Latifah acknowledges experiencing sexism in the music industry but uses coded language to reference her sexuality. She says,

"I'm not going to get too much into the personal, but how to live your life and how to find love, most importantly, and figure out loss. All these things have been things I have experienced, how to try some

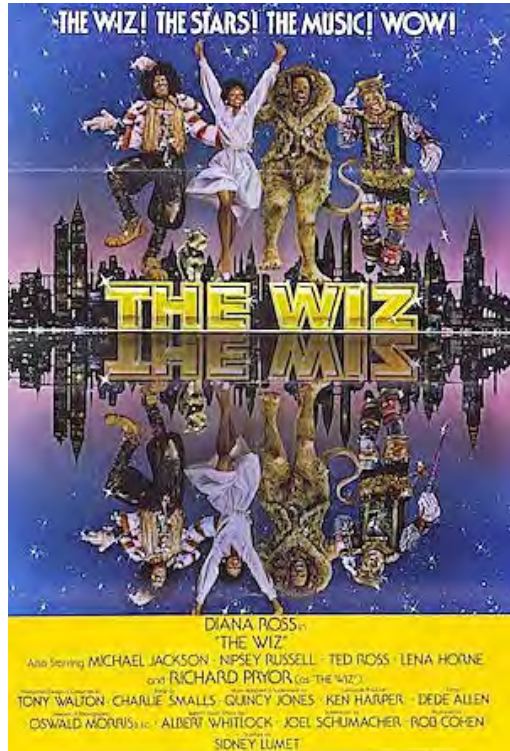
things and fail.”[44]

As expected, Latifah shies away from identifying with the queerness of the character she plays. Still, her choice to represent and embody Bessie Smith’s bisexuality is bold. In *Bessie*, Latifah helps create a new addition to Queer Black Cinema. Her commitment to the project demonstrates her commitment to validating Black queer lives, whether or not she speaks of her own sexuality out loud.

A gender-bending wizard: queering Oz in *The Wiz Live!*

Queen Latifah continues this project with her participation as the Wiz in NBC’s *The Wiz Live!*, a live televised adaptation of the Broadway show and film *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978). *The Wiz Live!* stages a queer-inclusive Afrofuturistic fantasy world, a world that Latifah helps build both on screen as a performer and off-screen in promotional interviews. Detailing the production history of *The Wiz*, I situate *The Wiz Live!*’s contemporary reemergence and then discuss queer cultural signifiers of the live show, focusing on the performances in the Emerald City and Queen Latifah’s starring role. Latifah’s performance as the Wiz embodies a particular expression of Black queer masculinity. While Latifah’s production company did not produce *The Wiz Live!*, her starring performance in the titular role and her interviews about the show incorporate references to Black and queer culture into the show.

The Wiz originated as a musical theater adaptation of L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* infused with African American cultural aesthetics and signifiers. Produced by Ken Harper with music and lyrics by Charlie Smalls, *The Wiz* premiered on stage in Baltimore in 1972 and opened at the Majestic Theater on Broadway in 1975.[45] *The Wiz* went on to win seven Tony Awards, including for Best Musical and Best Director.[46] Popular with both Black and white audiences, *The Wiz* became attractive to film production companies looking for a crossover hit.[47] Motown Productions acquired the film rights to *The Wiz* in 1977 and released the film adaptation in collaboration with Universal Studios in 1978, which famously cast superstars Diana Ross as Dorothy, Michael Jackson as the Scarecrow, and Richard Pryor as the Wiz. The film was a surprising commercial failure, but it became a cult classic.[48] Following its decline in popularity, *The Wiz* has remained at the margins of Broadway: a short revival of *The Wiz* ran in 1984, but there have been no Broadway revivals of the show over the last 35 years.



First a Broadway show and then a star-studded film, *The Wiz* is a musical adaptation of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* infused with Black cultural aesthetics and signifiers.



NBC's televised musical production *The Wiz Live!* featured a star-studded cast, featuring Queen Latifah in the titular role as the Wiz.

However, *The Wiz* has had a contemporary popular comeback: following other live televised musicals, NBC chose *The Wiz* for their 2015 live production. NBC cast newcomer Shanice Williams as Dorothy, backed up by a star-studded cast including Queen Latifah as the Wiz, Uzo Aduba as Glinda, Mary J. Blige as Evillene, Ne-Yo as the Tin Man, Amber Riley as Addaperle, and David Alan Grier as the Cowardly Lion. [29] *The Wiz Live!* premiered on December 3, 2015 and was an astounding commercial success: it received positive reviews from major newspapers,[49] drew over 11.5 million viewers,[50] and was the most live-Tweeted special program to date.[51]

During the airing of the show on December 3, 2015, the Twitter hashtag #thewizlive was flooded with laudatory remarks about representations of Blackness on the show. Bloggers praised the production's incorporation of Black cultural signifiers. As one blogger put it,

“Considering the level of visual brutality and violence we’ve been subjected to incessantly, it felt amazing to indulge in uninterrupted Black joy for a moment, no matter how brief.”[52]

In 2015, protests erupted across the U.S. in response to the police murders of Black people, Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland in particular. Protests escalated after police arrested domestic terrorist Dylan Roof, a young white man, after he murdered Black church goers in South Carolina. *The Wiz Live!* staged a celebration of Black life and culture, a welcome distraction from the heightened media attention towards the institutional assault on Black life.

The Wiz Live! incorporated Black queer and Afrofuturistic iconography into its celebratory aesthetics. *The Wiz* has recently been placed within a legacy of Afrofuturism, an aesthetics of Black cultural production that evokes futurist imaginations of fantasy, technology, the digital, and the intergalactic.[53] Afrofuturism incorporates generic elements of fantasy and science fiction to allegorize Black social alienation and envision configurations of Blackness beyond the archetypes offered in mainstream media. Dan Hassler-Forest argues that historical allusions to slavery and abolition in the film version of *The Wiz*, as well as the use of urban space to evoke a dystopian past and a speculative future fantasy world for Black liberation, firmly place the film within the realm of Afrofuturism.[54]

The Wiz Live! carries on this tradition, inserting references to Black queer culture



Scholars have recently analyzed the Afrofuturistic aesthetics of *The Wiz*, examining the film's fantastical urban city setting and its analogies of Black freedom struggles.

into its Afrofuturistic utopia. Scenes taking place in the Emerald City are rife with Afrofuturistic queer signifiers. When Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion enter the doors of the Emerald City, the image of a bright green cathedral-like hallway is projected on the LED screen behind the stage. In the hallway, Dorothy and her friends are confronted by a large group of dancers wearing bright green geometric jumpsuits, blazers, sneakers, and visors. As evidenced by their use of angular, symmetrical poses, rigid yet graceful hand, wrist, arm, and leg movements, and fluid floor performances, the dancers are performing vogue.

The practice of vogue in *The Wiz Live!* is undeniably a reference to queer culture. Vogue is commonly performed by urban Black and Latinx queer and transgender people in the house/ball community, specifically during ball competitions. As Marlon Bailey writes,

“the kin labor undertaken in houses and among the larger membership in the ballroom community sustains the community and adds value to the members' lives.”[55]

As such, vogue performance is symbolic of the practices queer and trans of color individuals undertake to survive in the face of specific forms of oppression and to create and celebrate community relationships. While voguing gained mainstream attention in the early 1990s via Madonna’s “Vogue” video and Jenny Livingston’s documentary about the house/ball community *Paris is Burning* (1990), and has been featured more recently in VH1’s television show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-2020) and FX’s *Pose* (2018-2020), it is still a practice largely associated with low-income urban queer and trans of color communities. In the narrative of *The Wiz Live!*, the Emerald City is the location of the Wizard of Oz, who can theoretically help grant the wishes of Dorothy and her friends. It makes sense then that voguing would appear in the only “urban” environment in *The Wiz Live!*, since it began as a dance form within urban queer communities. During the scene, the dancers on stage shout out terms that also originated with the house/ball community—“Work!”, “Slay!”, “Fierce!”—as if they are performing and judging one another in a ball competition. *The Wiz Live!* draws on this symbolism of vogue to create a fantasy world that includes the cultural practices of queer and trans people of color in its utopian imagination.

This becomes more apparent when Dorothy and friends meet the Wiz in the next scene. Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man walk into the Wiz’s chambers, which features a variety of Afrofuturistic iconography: a larger-than-life dark green mask sculpture, a mechanical crest featuring cogs, wheels, and Fritz Langian building cut-outs, and smaller silver face masks hung from the ceiling and the walls. As the group explores the chamber, the larger mask sculpture comes to life and fire and sparks shoot out from the ground. The Wiz appears in the middle of the stage: while traditionally played by a male actor, in this production Queen Latifah plays the Wiz.

Latifah’s presence and performance here embodies what Jack Halberstam has called “female masculinity.”[56] Her performance offers another queer moment in the show. Latifah enters the stage, singing “So You Wanted to Meet the Wizard” while wearing a bright green pantsuit and a cape, a white pompadour, and green contouring make up. She struts around the stage conjuring up fire and lightning in an attempt to convey her power to Dorothy and her friends. Latifah furrows her brow and sneers, intimidating her visitors as she belts the song. Her braggadocio creates a genderbending performance: Dorothy refers to the Wiz with male pronouns (“he”) but the Scarecrow refers to the Wiz with female pronouns (“she”). Analyzing an earlier Queen Latifah role, Kara Keeling looks at Latifah’s performance as Cleo in *Set it Off* as one of “ghettocentric” masculinity.[57]



Afrofuturistic aesthetics feature prominently in *The Wiz Live!*'s depiction of the Emerald City, whose inhabitants practice vogue, a highly stylized mode of dance most commonly performed by urban Black and Latinx LGBTQ people.



The entrance to the Wiz’s chambers also features Afrofuturistic iconography, including a larger-than-life green mask sculpture, a mechanical crest of cogs, wheels and building cut-outs, and smaller silver masks hung from the ceiling.



Queen Latifah's performance as the Wiz embodies a queer "female masculinity" that evokes Black butch lesbian gender presentation.

Keeling argues that Latifah's performance resonates with a "queer common sense" configuration of Black lesbian butch identity.[58] Similarly, Latifah's performance in *The Wiz Live!* similarly exudes a tough, masculine aesthetic and embodiment. As in *Set it Off*, here Latifah embodies a "queer common sense" formation of a butch gender presentation.

Latifah's portrayal of the Wiz exemplifies what Francesca Royster terms an "eccentric performance." [59] Royster argues that eccentric performance "depends on a queered relationship between body and sound" in which both musical genre and racial and gender boundaries are fluid and flexible.[60] Latifah's performance in *The Wiz Live!* plays with this queer relationship: her androgynous gender presentation meets the generic formula of the song. *The Wiz Live!* pulls from African diasporic musical traditions throughout its score; "So You Wanted to Meet the Wizard" in particular borrows from the rhythms and melodies of calypso. Meeting the beats of the music, Latifah intersperses her strutting with salsa dance sequences. Royster finds that, for Black performers in particular, eccentric performance provides a method of resistance and means of imagining "new sounds, new dances, new configurations of self—the makings of a black utopia." [61] In this case, "So You Wanted to Meet the Wizard" gestures towards the influence of Afro-Caribbean music and queer gender performance in the diaspora.

Of course, as Keeling writes, Latifah's "hip hop roots" affect the portrayal of her character.[62] The controversy around Latifah's sexuality also affects this portrayal. As Jonathan Gray writes,

"Paratexts tell us what to expect, and in doing so, they shape the reading strategies that we will take with us 'into' the text, and they provide the all-important early frames through which we will examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption." [63]

In this case, the "queer common sense" that allows for a queer reading of Latifah's performance is affected by rumors about her sexuality in the press. As queer Latina writer Gabby Rivera put it while watching the show on Twitter, "yo this is how Queen Latifah romances the ladiesss." [64] Some queer viewers of the telecast interpreted Latifah's performance as the Wiz as a representation of butch-femme romantic sociality. Lesbian historiographers have documented how butch-femme social arrangements and aesthetic codes helped create alternative relationships in queer communities[65] By invoking butch aesthetics, Latifah's performance of female masculinity in *The Wiz Live!* recalls Black queer and lesbian romantic partnerships. Like the incorporation of vogue in the choreography of the show, Latifah's queer performance gestures towards the rich cultural history of Black queer community experiences, aesthetics, and relationships.

It is likely that Latifah had less creative control over *The Wiz Live!* than *Bessie* because her production company was not involved in the project. Still, she had deep professional and personal ties to the show. Latifah has worked extensively with the out gay executive producers of *The Wiz Live!* Craig Zadan and Neil Meran.[66] Zadan and Meran produced the film versions of *Chicago*, *Hairspray*, and *Steel Magnolias* (2012) in which Latifah starred. Zadan mentioned in one interview, "The first call we always make on a project is to Queen Latifah." [67] While it is unclear how much Latifah is able to influence her role in their projects, she has discussed her enthusiasm about working with the team. In the same interview, she says,

"I felt comfortable with them, like I could trust myself in their hands, otherwise I would never even think about doing this....I wanted to be a part of it from the moment I heard they were doing this." [68]



While watching the show live in 2015, writer Gabby Rivera commented, "yo this is how Queen Latifah romances the ladiesss" on Twitter, reflecting how some queer viewers interpreted Latifah's performance as one of butch-femme romantic sociality.

Latifah's personal connection to *The Wiz* influenced her decision to perform in the show as well. In an interview with *Mashable*, Latifah credits *The Wiz* with inspiring her career:

"It was the first Broadway play I ever saw...My mom took me there as a kid — I don't know how she hustled up those tickets, because I knew money was tight — but she managed to get some tickets and took us to see it. It was the first play I ever saw and I was blown away. I was amazed by it. It opened my mind up ... I was seeing a story that I was familiar with, but told through the lens of people who looked like me, African American people, with some soul to it. It felt more relatable ... Oz wasn't just a fantasy land, it was a place that I could go." [69]

Here Latifah describes her affective relationship to *The Wiz*. It was a crucial text for her as a young Black woman growing up in a low-income household. As the first show she ever witnessed as an audience member, it inspired in her a belief in the transformative power of art and in her own ability to create art. While *The Wizard of Oz* has a long history of generating queer readings in popular culture, as always, Latifah does not discuss the queer aspects of her work in interviews. Still, when spotlighting Black queer aesthetics in Emerald City, *The Wiz Live!* embraces queer identity and culture and integrates it into the very fabric of the show's aesthetics. Latifah plays a central role in creating this queer-inclusive fantasy world.

Conclusion: the strategic ambiguity of living out

Whether or not Queen Latifah ever discusses her sexuality in a public way, she is not "hiding" her dedication to LGBTQ communities and Black queer history. I am reminded of how actress Holland Taylor recently discussed her relationships with women: "I haven't come out because I am out," she said, adding, "I live out." [70] By "living out," Taylor describes how she has pursued relationships with women without discussing them in the press. Queen Latifah may be "living out" as well. As mentioned earlier, she has not hidden her relationships with women from the paparazzi. "Living out" might be a useful approach to describe how some LGBTQ celebrities navigate the constant is-she-or-isn't-she speculation while trying to maintain some semblance of a private life. Indeed, "living out" resembles Ralina Joseph's concept of "strategic ambiguity," describing the work of Black women in television production. Joseph argues "strategic ambiguity" is a tool of postracial resistance that helps women of color navigate and respond to racism and sexism in the workplace. [71] Perhaps Queen Latifah employs strategic ambiguity when confronted with rumors about her sexuality: by evading these questions, she avoids the racialized and gendered homophobia she would likely experience by coming out publicly.

Latifah's sexual ambiguity may increase her ability to appeal to wide commercial audiences. As Maria San Filippo argues, bisexual representations that appeal "to variable spectatorial identifications, desires, and readings [enhance] commercial prospects, so long as representations of sexuality do not stray too radically from contemporaneous standards of mainstream acceptability." [72] This commercial strategy, which Katherine Sender calls "dual casting," allows industry professional to market the same content to both general and niche audiences. [73] In this case, Latifah's participation in many of her media projects may entertain straight, cisgender audiences while simultaneously exciting LGBTQ viewers who "read" queerness into her performances, as I have done in this article. In *Bessie* and *The*



Latifah's performances as Matron Mamma Morton in *Chicago* (2002) and Hattie McDaniel in *Hollywood* (2020) mark other significant queer performances in her career, helping to demonstrate her commitment to uplifting the histories and narratives of Black queer women on screen.

Wiz Live!, however, the queer performance is not subtext: as I have discussed, both projects demonstrate a remarkable commitment to uplifting Black LGBTQ culture. Other aspects of these shows—the musical numbers, the representations of marginalized history, or other starring performers—may appeal to wider audiences, but certainly the representations of queer gender and sexuality do stray from mainstream norms more explicitly than most dual-cast commercial media.

While critics and fans may continue to speculate about Latifah's sexuality, I have proposed an alternative lens through which to engage these questions. Using a production studies approach, combined with an analysis of Latifah's embodied performances and a paratextual reading of her press interviews, scholars can examine her varied film and television projects, especially those that engage Black LGBTQ culture, regardless of her sexuality. As Royster writes, no matter the sexual identities of certain celebrities,

“their performances mean and mean intensely for other Black and queer lives, as models, influences, and soundtracks to queer world making.” [74]

Latifah does not always play LGBTQ roles—she plays heterosexual characters in many if not most of her roles—yet her work consistently uplifts Black and LGBTQ stories. Looking more closely at this work allows us to see Latifah as a contemporary television producer whose authorial imprint lies in her demonstrated investment in Black queer culture. There is certainly more to add to Queen Latifah's queer oeuvre—her contributions to contemporary Queer Black Cinema and television are significant. Further work might return to Kara Keeling's analysis of Latifah's role in *Set it Off*, consider Latifah's role as lesbian commanding officer Matron Mamma Morton in *Chicago*, or examine her recent queer performance as Hattie McDaniel in *Hollywood*. To cast off Latifah for her allegedly normative politics, or to ignore her role in creating Black and queer media, is to miss a significant aspect of her work. More urgently, it is to miss the opportunity to examine queer media production beyond out queer authorship. By examining Latifah's work, scholars can expand our understanding of queer film and television authorship to include the political commitments, performances, and labor of more private media creators. This method of analysis can help transcend the epistemology of the closet in queer media studies to honor the queer labor of these creators without asking invasive questions or making assumptions about their sexualities. As such, it provides new inroads for the study of marginal production cultures, demonstrating how stars can encode queer-of-color subcultural meanings into mainstream texts via production and performance.

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Notes

Acknowledgements: A number of mentors, colleagues, thought partners, and friends shaped my thinking during the process of writing this article. I would like to thank Miriam Petty, Nick Davis, Shayna Silverstein, Joëlle Rouleau and Julia Lesage, Nicole Morse, the Spring 2017 cohort of Northwestern's Gender & Sexuality Studies graduate student colloquium (including Cara Dickason, Bennie Niles, Shoniqua Roach, and Rae Langes in particular), Ilana Emmett, Crystal Camargo, and Tobias Rodriguez for their support and feedback at various stages of this project. Special thanks to my former roommates, Trace Roth and Kim Singletary, with whom I watched *Bessie* and *The Wiz Live!* respectively, and whose love of Black and queer cultural production helped inspire this piece. All my gratitude, as always, to Steph and Bella Herold, for everything.

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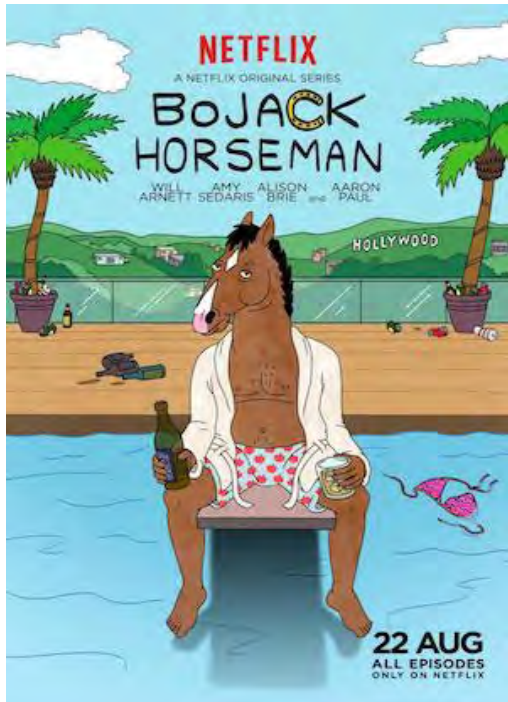
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Promotional material for *BoJack Horseman* on Netflix including a typical image of BoJack drinking by the pool and surrounded by the detritus of his previous parties.

All About that Ace: representing asexuality and queer identity in *BoJack Horseman*

by [Sarah E. S. Sinwell](#)

Created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and starring the voices of Will Arnett (as BoJack), Amy Sedaris (as Princess Caroline), Alison Brie (as Diane), and Aaron Paul (as Todd), the adult animated series *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014-2020) is perhaps most famous for kickstarting a rebirth of the adult animated series on streaming platforms. After *BoJack Horseman* came series such as *Big Mouth* (Netflix, 2017-present), *Tuca and Bertie* (Netflix, 2019), and *Undone* (Amazon, 2019). Nominated for three Emmys for Outstanding Animated Program and winner of four Critic's Choice Television Awards for Best Animated Series, *BoJack Horseman* was named "the best animated series of all time" by *IndieWire* in 2018 (Miller 2018). [[open reference page in new window](#)] However, in 2017, *BoJack Horseman* also became famous for being the first television show to feature a character to come out as asexual.

The story of the washed-up nineties ABC sitcom star of *Horsin' Around*, *BoJack Horseman*'s central character is BoJack himself. He's constantly faced with the cancellation of his cheesy sitcom, his brief success and fame, and his subsequent descent into alcoholism and depression. And, like many other animated adult sitcoms such as *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-present), *Family Guy* (Fox, 1999-present), and *Bob's Burgers* (Fox, 2011-present), the show's secondary characters such as Princess Caroline, Diane, and Todd become just as central to the show's narrative as BoJack.



The main characters of *BoJack Horseman*—Diane, Todd, BoJack, Princess Carolyn, Mr. Peanutbutter—complete with their most canonical facial expressions.



The character of Todd is introduced for the first time in BoJack's kitchen wearing his usual yellow cap and red hoodie while BoJack lounges around in his robe and pajama pants.



The character of House from *House, M.D.* where representations of asexuality perpetuate norms of pathology.

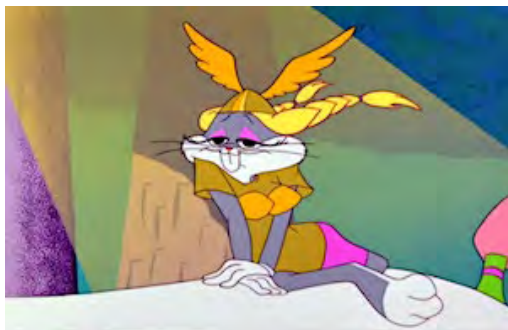
This essay focuses on the character of Todd Chavez (voiced by Aaron Paul) who has been recognized as the first television character to come out as asexual. Studying not only his coming out process (particularly throughout season four but through other seasons as well), but also how the show represents asexuality and LGBTQIA+ identities through his character and others, I argue for the construction of asexuality as queer. By incorporating a feminist and queer analysis of asexuality, I will also examine how asexuality can be understood in relation to the construction of animated animals and the idea of the human/non-human. Through an analysis of how *BoJack Horseman* represents asexuality onscreen, I will also investigate how the show creates asexual community, resists heteronormativity, and promotes asexual and queer visibility on television.

Asexuality and queerness on television

An asexual is defined as “a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (Cerankowski and Milks 2014, AVEN 2020). Stereotypically, asexuality has often been conflated with sexual trauma, desexualization, and the lack of sexual desirability (Bogaert 2004 and 2006; Prause and Graham 2007; Scherrer 2008; Cerankowski and Milks 2014; Corrigan, Gupta, and Morrison 2014; Decker 2014; Gressgard 2014; Gupta 2019; Cuthbert 2019; Mitchell and Honeycutt 2019; Przybylo 2019). [[Open included bibliography on asexuality in new window](#)] For example, in shows such as *House* (Fox, 2004-2012), *Law and Order: SVU* (NBC, 1999-present), and *Huge* (ABC Family, 2010), asexuality was associated not only with pathology and mental illness, but also desexualization and the non-normative body (Sinwell 2014).

Since the founding of AVEN (the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network) in 2001, an online network for asexual education, wikis, social groups, etc., asexual visibility has been an increasingly studied subject within the LGBTQIA+ community. Since 2001, AVEN has strived to represent asexuality as a sexuality rather than a pathology. In fact, the A was added for asexuality within the LGBTQIA+ as a means of including asexual people within the larger queer community. Over the past two decades, asexuality has also been continually defined and (re)defined to include romantic asexuals and aromantic asexuals (also called *aros* and *aces*), as well as demisexuals (“someone who can only experience sexual attraction or desire after an emotional bond has been formed”), and gray-asexuals or gray-sexuals (“someone who identifies with the area between asexuality and sexuality”) (AVEN 2020). Like queerness itself, the definition of asexuality is also what Annemarie Jagose in *Queer Theory: An Introduction* calls “an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming” (1996, 131). Thus, just as asexuality as a term and as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community is constantly changing, so, too, does the character of Todd and his relationship to his own (a)sexuality.

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Bugs Bunny, the rabbit in drag, represents the queer potential of animated characters.

When analyzing the representation of queer characters on television, often the first stage of understanding this form of representation is *presence* (the existence of queer characters onscreen even if they are minor characters such as the gay best friend, gay neighbor, etc.). Next, one might search for *positive representation*. These characters are not just criminals, serial killers, or victims, as in many examples such as *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013), *Mysterious Skin* (Gregg Araki, 2004), and *Law and Order: SVU* (NBC, 1999-present). Codirector of Ace Los Angeles (a social group for people on the asexual spectrum) Samantha Chappell says, “All of these negative portrayals do very much come into the general public’s consciousness, whether they’re aware of it or not,” Chappell says, rattling off a few of the misconceptions she hears.

“We just haven’t met the right person yet. There are people who genuinely argue that we haven’t gone through some sort of puberty yet. ... I’ve had people ask me if I can sexually reproduce. Multiple people, not just one” (Kliegman 2016).



Promotional material for *Steven Universe*, an animated show backed by queer creators and producers.



David Jay, founder of the Asexual Visibility Education Network.

Thus, in order to combat these negative representations, one must not only create positive representations, but also representations that consist of *complex, multifaceted, layered characters*. The scriptwriter should develop characters defined not only by their asexuality but also allowed to be as complicated as sexual and non-queer characters. In *BoJack Horseman*, not only does Todd develop as a character beyond his sexuality and beyond one episode, but he does so throughout multiple seasons, multiple episodes, and in multiple relationships.

As Mary Beltran and Melanie Kohnen have argued,

“meaningful diversity in television occurs when characters of color move beyond token status and appear as complex people with rich interiority and the agency to drive the narrative forward” (Beltran 2014; Kohnen 2015, 88).

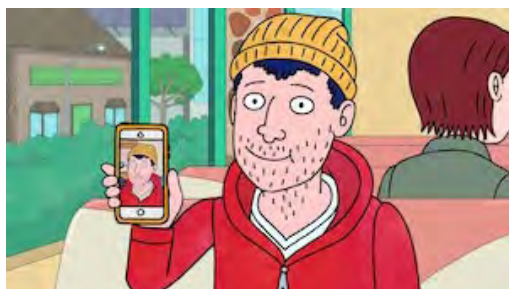
In “The Rabbit in Drag,” Sam Abel (1995) discusses the queer potential of animated characters such as Bugs Bunny and many critics have also discussed the presence of queer characters on animated shows such as *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-present) and *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997-present) (Stabile and Harrison 2003; Padvá 2008; Wells 2015; Pugh 2018). Though *BoJack Horseman* is not backed and produced by queer creators like *Steven Universe* (Cartoon Network, 2013-2020), *Adventure Time* (Cartoon Network, 2010-2018), and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (Netflix, 2018-2020), it is attempting to open up the ideas of queerness and asexuality on television (Dean 2020). Often dubbed the “invisible orientation,” asexuality has been understood as an invisible category of sexuality and only recently imagined as included in both the media and within the LGBTQIA+ community (Bogaert 2004; Bogaert 2006; Scherrer 2008; Chasin 2011; Gressgard 2013; Decker 2014; Gupta 2019; Cuthbert 2019). As Giffney and Hird argue,

“The unremitting emphasis in queer theoretical work on fluidity, über-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable is an attempt to undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries” (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 4).

In the early 2000s, following the founding of AVEN by spokesperson and out asexual David Jay, much of the discussion of asexuality centered around their presence on talk shows such as *The View* (ABC, 1997-present) and *The Montel Williams Show* (CBS, 1991-2008) (Cerankowski, 2014). Additionally, asexual identity also featured on crime shows such as *Law and Order: SVU* (NBC, 1999-present), *House* (Fox, 2004-2012), and *Dexter*. However, as I have noted in my own essay on the representation of asexuality in the media entitled “Aliens and Asexuality: Media Representation, Queerness, and Asexual Visibility,” these representations usually only lasted for a single episode and frequently associated sexuality with pathology and even psychosis (Sinwell, 2014).

In this essay, I argue that asexuality is often linked to pathology, normalcy, and non-normative bodies, pointing out that “asexuality has traditionally (and often stereotypically) been represented onscreen in relation to desexualization” (2014, 166). Thus, asexual people were often represented only through such non-normative and desexualized bodily categories as fatness, nerdiness, Asian-ness, and disability. In her discussion of “spectacular asexuality,” Karli Cerankowski argues,

“The spectacular ambiguity and ambivalence of queer bodies within regimes of knowing may continue to shock audiences with the unknown and unthought-of possibilities in regards to what “normal”



Todd Chavez showing off his identical headshot.



Herb Kazzaz, BoJack's gay friend and producer, performs on stage in BoJack's dream.

sexuality looks like" (2014, 156).

In *BoJack Horseman*, Todd's character represents his asexuality as almost prototypically normal. Unlike the movie stars, agents, and writers that are primarily present on the show, Todd is instead a guy-next door that is neither identified with fame nor celebrity. As Cerankowski and others point out, this concern and desire for queer and asexual visibility is many layered, for as Lynn Joyrich notes,

"The language of visibility, as a particular discourse of knowledge, a particular mode of meditation, and a particular political programme, thus retains its own blind spots" (2009, 17).

Queer television itself is highly contested, intertwining narratives of not only representation, but also production, reception, form, and the industry. As Glyn Davis and Gary Needham note in *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics* (2008), "what might the "queer" of a queer television studies be"? Like Davis and Needham, Becker (2006), Brennan (2019) Doty (1993, 2000), Griffin (2016), Chambers (2009), Himberg (2018), Kohnen (2015), Miller (2019), Parsemain (2019), Pugh (2019), Raun (2016), Steinbock (2018), Villarejo (2014), and others, this essay seeks to explain what makes *BoJack Horseman* queer.

In *Queer TV*, Glyn Davis and Gary Needham point out that "queer characters and people on television remain largely white" and "gay men appear more than lesbians, bisexuals, and trans individuals" (2009, 3). In her discussion of queer television studies, Lynne Joyrich argues that "queer television studies then produce a tension between the articulation of the mainstream and the unsettling of the mainstream" (2014, 133). *BoJack Horseman* engages with this tension, centering around its straight male character of BoJack, while also enabling alternative forms of queer representation through characters such as Todd. If, as Frederik Dhaenens and others have argued, "the medium of television is governed by heteronormativity" (2014, 520), then *BoJack Horseman* offers up new forms of queer representation through its characterization of Todd and his asexuality.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Queering the human and non/human: studying Todd's asexual experience

In *The Queer Politics of Television* (2009), [\[open reference page in new window\]](#) Samuel Chambers notes the ways in which the politics of television are dependent upon the politics of its day (3). In the case of *BoJack Horseman*, part of the pleasure of watching the show is its attention to in-jokes and self-reflexive moments about Hollywood, the entertainment industry, and the current cultural and political climate. However, through the character of Todd as well as his relationships with Yolanda, Emily, and Maude, the show introduces a new cultural understanding of asexuality and enables it to be visible within popular culture.



A typical scene in *BoJack Horseman* includes Todd and BoJack in conversation over pizza in BoJack's Hollywood mansion.



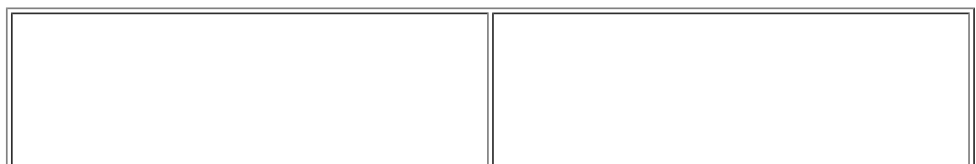
Todd tries internet dating and becomes part of a scam.

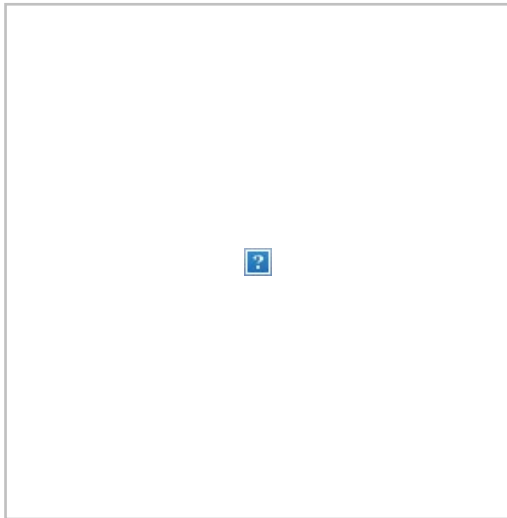


This flashback shows Todd as a teenager in his previous dating life with his girlfriend Emily.

In the pilot episode of *BoJack Horseman*, a human character, Todd, is introduced as BoJack's houseguest of over five years. Sleeping on BoJack's couch without paying rent, Todd was kicked out of his parents' house for his "alternative lifestyle." But, whereas BoJack thought it might be because Todd was "a troubled gay teen or something," Todd was actually kicked out because he refused to grow up and accept adult responsibility. After leaving home at a very young age, Todd refused to go back home or see his ailing mother.

Over the first few episodes of the first season, Todd online dates a female scammer who tries to steal all his money and in season three, we eventually see flashbacks of his previous teenage dating life with Emily (voiced by Abbi Jacobson). However, though at first the suggestion that Todd could be a troubled gay teen comes off as unlikely due to his heteronormative appearance and heterosexual dating life, upon screening the entire series, BoJack's offhanded commentary in the pilot episode could be understood as foreshadowing Todd's inclusion within the LGBTQIA+ community multiple seasons later. At the same time, Todd's early association with queerness also suggests his discomfort with his own (a)sexuality and his uncertainty over his own ideas of romantic and sexual attraction.





Todd's teenage discomfort with sex is evident from his awkwardness with language.



Todd and Emily attempt an awkward kiss.



Todd reveals to Emily, "I don't know what I am. I think I might be nothing."



Todd continues to be uncomfortable with his sexuality in this scene.



Todd comes out as asexual to BoJack.

By season three, episode 2, Todd's sexual identity becomes even more a part of the series narrative as it is revealed that he is both a virgin and has never been kissed. He also reveals to Emily that "I don't like anyone." Then, in the last episode of the season (Season 3, Episode 12), Todd dates Emily but he is not interested in having sex with her, saying, "I'm not gay. I mean, I don't think I am. But I don't think I'm straight, either," he says slowly, playing with his spoon. "I don't know what I am. I think I might be nothing." Emily responds to his statement of "being nothing" with acceptance, saying, "That's OK."

This concept of "being nothing" can be linked to the idea that asexuality has often been understood as the "invisible orientation," since it is only recently (in the past two decades) that it has been defined as a sexual orientation and sexuality and been included within the LGBTQIA+ community (Decker 2014, AVEN 2020). In *BoJack Horseman*, the seemingly immediate acceptance of multiple forms of being, in relationship to both sexuality and sex, also enables an understanding of sexuality that is inclusive of the idea that queerness is constantly being (re)defined, (re)negotiated, and questioned. Challenging the idea of normal and normative sexuality, asexuality also questions the supposition that human beings are not only *heterosexual* but *sexual* (Sedgwick 1990; Foucault 1990; Jagose 1995; Butler 2004; Johnson and Henderson 2005; Villarejo 2014; Halberstam 1998, 2005, and 2018).

By allowing Todd's exploration of his (a)sexuality to occur over multiple episodes and seasons, *BoJack Horseman* also reaches toward Beltran's idea of "meaningful diversity" by moving beyond "token status," enabling Todd to become a complex character, and providing him with "the agency to drive the narrative forward" (2014). It isn't until the third episode of season four that Todd comes out as asexual, telling BoJack, "I think I'm asexual." When he tells BoJack, "I'm sure you think that's weird," BoJack responds, "No. Are you kidding? That's amazing." Todd then says, "It actually feels nice to finally say it out loud. I'm an asexual person. I am asexual." Again, this narrative of inclusion and acceptance not only enables Todd to be comfortable expressing his own asexuality, but also enables larger cultural acceptance within media and popular culture. It is also significant that Todd's asexual narrative continues beyond this one "very special episode." As Jason Mittell discusses in his understanding of *Complex TV* (2015), the serial nature of the show, along with its self-reflexivity, its violation of traditional storytelling conventions of time and space, and its impact on viewer engagement also contribute to the show's ability to represent asexual characters such as Todd in complex and meaningful ways.

Both Julia Himberg (2018) and Alfred L. Martin (2018 and 2019) have referred to the contemporary desire for "realistic" representations in terms of casting and writing LGBTQIA+ characters on television. For instance, audiences and critics



Todd learns about his own asexuality from other asexuals at an asexual meet-up.

have searched for LGBTQIA+ characters that are as multidimensional and complex “as their heterosexual counterparts” (Himberg 2018, 58). By enabling Todd’s asexual narrative to occur over multiple episodes, multiple seasons, and multiple relationships, *BoJack Horseman* also envisions an understanding of asexuality that is layered, complex, and multidimensional and one that pushes beyond the boundaries of stereotypes about LGBTQIA+ and asexual identities.



Todd dates Yolanda, the asexual axolotl.

In fact, multiple episodes later in the season, Yolanda Buenaventura of the Better Business Bureau (voiced by Natalie Morales) asks Todd out. It is significant that Yolanda is played by an axolotl, a famously asexual animal and a commonly used symbol of the asexual community. In fact, the show’s intertwining of human and animal characters throughout the series enables what Giffney and Hird argue is a

“challenging of binaries pertaining to nature/culture, living/dead, beautiful/grotesque, desire/disgust, subject/object, presence/absence and human/nonhuman” (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 2).



Princess Carolyn, BoJack’s agent, surrounded by cat puns.



Mr. Peanutbutter, BoJack’s friend. His animal traits include being excited by visitors at the door.

Though the characters of Princess Carolyn (a cat), Mr. Peanutbutter (a dog), and Yolanda are represented as animals, they also uphold both their human and their distinguishing animal traits. For instance, Princess Carolyn prefers fish and plays with yarn, and Mr. Peanutbutter sleeps in a dog bed and plays fetch. By creating the character of Yolanda as a well-known asexual animal, the script offers not only a self-reflexive nod to the asexual community (who are familiar with this connection), but this also enables a rethinking of the relations between humans and animals (especially once the audience learns that the rest of Yolanda’s family



of axolotls are not asexual).



A typical BoJack Horseman party, including animals, humans, and puns.

In *Queering the Non/Human*, Giffney and Hird position a slash in between “Non” and “Human” “as it is between and in-between simultaneously, raises the issue of ‘limits, margins, borders, and boundaries’ (Fuss 1991), but also that of instability, fluidity, reliance and vulnerability” (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 3). In *BoJack Horseman*, this fluidity and instability between humans and animals also occurs. We often forget that the animal characters are not human—until a clever visual pun on screen reminds us. In addition, the animals are characteristically both represented by their animal traits and directly opposed to them (as is the case with Yolanda and her family). Using the term queering as a verb and pointing out the self-reflexivity involved in these animal/human/non/human relationships, Giffney and Hird also argue about queerness:

“A spirit of critique underpins much queer theorising in addition to a respect for difference, dedication to self-reflexivity and drive towards revision” (Johnson and Henderson 2005; McRuer 2006) (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 4).

In season five, Todd suggests creating a dating app for asexuals. This is where Yolanda first suggests the idea of romantic and aromantic asexuals. Todd continues to explain the multiple meanings of asexuality by saying,

“Think of it this way, we could be a) romantic, or b) aromantic, while also being a) sexual or b) asexual. So, in the one percent of the population that’s asexual, there’s an even smaller percentage that’s still looking for romantic companionship.”

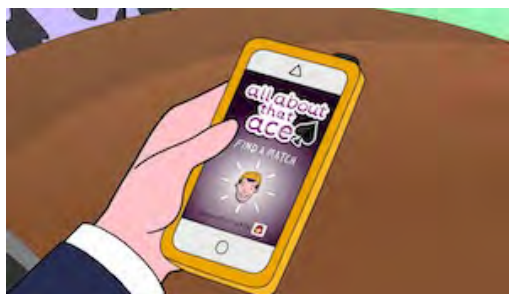
His clever wordplay aside, this conversation is also significant since it makes it clear that the show is explicitly attempting to be inclusive of the multiple meanings of romantic and aromantic asexuality and to inform and to teach the public about these meanings.

Season five, episode three, entitled “Planned Obsolescence,” includes perhaps the



A typical use of animal puns. Book titles include *A Tale of Two Kitties*, *Romeow and Juliet*, *The Color Purrple*, and *Purrsepolis*.

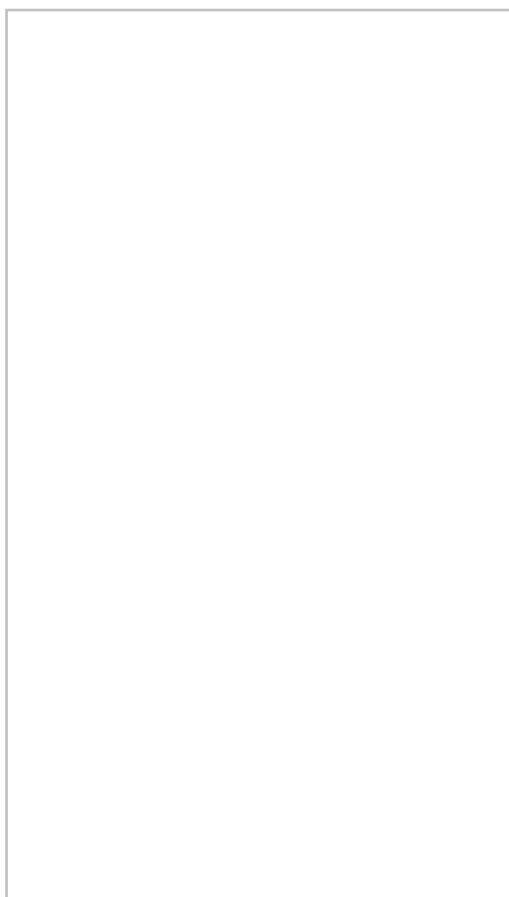




All About that Ace, the dating app for asexuals.



Yolanda asks Todd out since she knows they are both asexual.



most complex and complicated understandings of the asexual community. In this episode, Yolanda takes Todd home to meet her parents (who don't know she is asexual). The script pushes the thematic contrasts since her father is an erotic novelist, her mother is an adult film star, and her twin sister is a sex advice columnist. In fact, Yolanda's entire family is hypersexualized, constantly discussing sex, filling their home with Georgia O'Keeffe artwork and nude statues, offering up erotic dessert at the family dinner table, and insisting that Yolanda and Todd "make love" in their home.



Todd meets Yolanda's (not so asexual) family, whose interior decor is overtly sexual.

It is also clear from this episode that not only does Todd have trouble understanding his own (a)sexuality, but, he also does not understand sex, mispronouncing "Hubba, Hubba" and awkwardly unable to articulate himself when it comes to sex. The plot of this episode then revolves around Todd and Yolanda's attempts to prove that they are not asexual to her family.





Yolanda's twin sister tries to seduce Todd.



Yolanda's mother tries to seduce Todd.

While Yolanda's mother and sister try to seduce Todd, her father offers up the family's last barrel of "secret recipe personal lubricant." Hijinks ensue after they spill the lube over the entire house, and Yolanda finally admits that she is asexual to her family. "One thorough but respectful dialogue later," Yolanda explains her asexuality to her parents offscreen. Ironically she and Todd break up after realizing that the fact that they are both asexual is not enough to keep them together—they have nothing else in common.



The lube incident in Yolanda's family home.

The show's choice to have this "thorough and respectful" dialogue with her parents about asexuality offscreen is an interesting one. Whereas the show could have used this as an opportunity to continue to define and (re)define asexuality and asexual acceptance and inclusion, instead, the overarching narrative that enabled Todd and Yolanda to discover and explore their own asexualities ends with that episode. In this way, the show continues to participate in narrative complexity (Mittell 2015) since this dialogue is constructed self-reflexively about occurring in what is known critically as a "very special episode." With a knowing wink to the audience, the show reminds us of its own awareness that in the "very special episode" in the genres of sitcoms or "after school specials," we would have usually witnessed this conversation and overtly participated in an educational moment of television pedagogy. As Kelly Kessler (2011) has noted,

"In today's American television landscape, GLB characters are cropping up across the dial and across genres. Writers are presenting queer characters outside the bounds of premium cable and the "very special" episode"' (140).

As Frederik Dhaenens and Sofie Van Bauwel argue in their analysis of adult animation, adult animations' use of parody, intertextuality, and exaggeration (clearly present in this episode) enables the unsettling of heteronormative values,



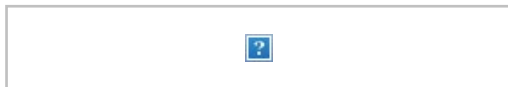
Todd and Yolanda break up after meeting Yolanda's parents for the first time.



Todd's thinking of creating a dating app for asexuals.



Todd discussed his dating app for asexuals with Yolanda.



Maude, Todd's new girlfriend, is a rabbit that questions the idea that rabbits are extremely sexual animals.

particularly those of the typical nuclear family (2012, 129). At the same time, as Jack Halberstam argues,

“I also want to propose that popular culture has already imagined multiple alternatives to male and female, masculine and feminine, family and individuality and, that contemporary popular culture, specifically horror film and animation, can provide a rich archive for an alternative politics of embodiment, reproduction and non-reproduction.” (2008, 266).

Todd's representation of asexuality in this episode fits the stereotype that asexuals just don't understand sex and that is why they are asexual, yet, at the same time, it also opens up understandings of asexuality to think about their alternative meanings through the characters of Yolanda and her family. In addition, by enabling Todd to date Yolanda over multiple episodes and break up with her because both characters being asexual is not enough, the scripts also can develop multiple meanings of asexuality onscreen. In this way, the show also breaks the stereotypical representation of LGBTQIA+ identity since in relatively queer-positive shows, the only two LGBTQIA+ members of a cast will be involved romantically and/or sexually and have no other options for possible love interests over the course of a series, never mind an episode.

Later in the series, Todd suggests that perhaps he could have a romantic but asexual relationship with Emily (suggesting even more possibilities for asexual romantic and aromantic relationships onscreen). Then, in the final season, Todd joins Emily's dating app for asexuals, All About that Ace, and meets a rabbit named Maude who is also asexual (voiced by Echo Gilette). This is also significant (animal) casting as rabbits are widely understood to represent very sexual creatures. Thus, *BoJack Horseman* both upholds and resists stereotypes of asexual identity by enabling a human, an axolotl, and a rabbit to be asexual. At the same time, the show's blurring of boundaries between these sexual and asexual identities also enables it to represent its characters and their sexualities as fluid, nonbinary, and multifaceted.

Additionally, the presence of the asexual meet-up onscreen is also indicative of the show's understanding of asexual and queer communities. This scene includes not only Yolanda and Todd, but, also an anteater, a dog, and many asexual humans. This inclusion of other members of the asexual community furthers the queer narrative of *BoJack Horseman* by enabling Todd to resist being identified as the token asexual, and also provides a variety of representations of asexuality on the show. In addition, asexual characters are also represented through multiple genders, body types, and as both humans and animals. This also creates an understanding of asexuality that is more inclusive and nuanced than examples from *House*, *Dexter*, or *Mysterious Skin* allowed for (Sinwell 2014).



Todd visits an asexual meet-up which includes both humans and animals.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



A flashback to a moment when Herb Kazzaz and BoJack Horseman are celebrating.



Gina Cazador, BoJack's costar voiced by Stephanie Beatriz.



Dr. Indira and Mary-Beth, women of color voiced by women of color, Issa Rae and Wanda Sykes.

Voicing queerness, nationality, sexuality, and race

Though *BoJack Horseman* features very few queer characters, BoJack's former showrunner and producer and creator of *Horsin' Around* Herb Kazzaz (voiced by Stanley Tucci) holds a particularly significant role in his life that continues throughout the entire series (Drury 2020). [\[open reference page in new window\]](#) Though the character Herb is identified as gay pretty early on in the series, the show focuses even more on his role as producer and his struggles with cancer than his sexual identity. This scripting allows Herb to be understood not *only* in relation to his sexuality but as multilayered and complex, much like the character of BoJack himself. When Herb was blacklisted for being gay after he was discovered engaging in a public sex act with another man, BoJack refused to support him in solidarity. Then, throughout the entire series, BoJack revisits this inaction over and over again. Furthermore, similar inactions in his life lead not only to his own feelings of guilt and depression, but to other characters' overdoses, deaths, and suicides. Thus, it is BoJack's lack of support in relation to Herb's sexuality that leads to his own personal downfall.

By reminding us that BoJack did not fight for Herb after he was fired for being gay and then introducing the character of Gina Cazador (BoJack's co-star in *Philbert* played by Stephanie Beatriz, an Argentinian actress and an out bisexual), the series also links Todd's exploration of his own asexuality to other members of the LGBTQIA+ community. For example, a few episodes later, the show also introduces the lesbian couple of Dr. Indira, Diane's psychotherapist (voiced by Issa Rae) and her spouse Mary-Beth (voiced by Wanda Sykes). In the case of Dr. Indira and Mary-Beth, it is also significant that these queer characters are voiced by women of color, supporting the idea of "meaningful diversity," solidarity, and inclusion of both women of color and the LGBTQIA+ community within the show's casting and narratives.

However, in animation, "meaningful diversity" casting and voicing has faced a variety of critiques. In 2020, in the wake of Black Lives Matter and the newly renewed concern over voice-over representation in animated series like Hank Azaria's voicing of Indian Kwik-E-Mart owner Apu on *The Simpsons*, *BoJack Horseman* received negative press for its voice casting of white actor Alison Brie for the role of Diane Nguyen, a Vietnamese American character on *BoJack Horseman*. During the same week, voice actors Jenny Slate and Kristen Bell announced they'd be exiting their voice roles as biracial characters on *Big Mouth* (Netflix, 2017-present) and *Central Park* (AppleTV+, 2020-present), and Mike Henry, who voiced Cleveland Brown on *Family Guy* (Fox, 1999-present), gave up his role as well. As noted in *Variety*, "*The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-present) producers also issued a statement saying they'd no longer allow white actors to voice non-white characters on the series. For many years, the show drew controversy for Hank Azaria's portrayal of the Indian character Apu" (Moreau 2020). In fact, this concern over allowing white actors to voice characters of color is the subject of a documentary called *The Problem with Apu* (Michael Melamedoff, 2017).

In response to these concerns, on June 27, 2020, Brie posted on her Instagram account,



Diane Nguyen, BoJack's Vietnamese American friend voiced by Alison Brie.

“In hindsight, I wish that I didn’t voice the character of Diane Nguyen. I now understand that people of color should always voice people of color. We missed a great opportunity to represent the Vietnamese American community accurately and respectfully, and for that I am truly sorry. I applaud all those who stepped away from their voiceover roles in recent days. I have learned a lot from them” (Moreau 2020).

And, creator of the show Raphael Bob-Waksberg wrote,

“We should have hired a Vietnamese writer and a Vietnamese actress to play Diane — or if not that, changed the character to match who we did hire” (Moreau 2020).

Interestingly, these attempts at racial and national inclusion for voice actors in animated series did not extend to a discussion of casting (presumably sexual) Aaron Paul as Todd. In fact, the asexual community lauded Paul’s portrayal of Todd, seeing him as an icon and positive representation of asexuality on television. In an interview with *BuzzFeed News*, Paul himself stated,

“I was so proud to represent that community, and so many people came up to me, or have been coming up to me, since that come out, saying, ‘I didn’t know what I was. You have given me a community that I didn’t even know existed,’ which is just so heartbreaking, but also so beautiful, you know?”

He added, “I think it’s so nice to have a character on TV — especially on a show so powerful like *BoJack* — that represents a community that should be represented” (Mack 2019).

As F. Hollis Griffin notes in *Feeling Normal* (2016),

“If identity is a necessary fiction for politics and a convenient fiction for the marketplace, it is also a comforting fiction that helps people feel connected to others and make sense of the everyday” (1).

In her work on contemporary gay and lesbian television in *The New Gay for Pay*, Julia Himberg discusses the push for visibility within the LGBT community and argues that “media representation is a form of cultural currency, providing validation to sexual minorities that they are seen as part of the nationstate” (2017, 10). Like the movement to include and cast trans actors in trans roles following the release of such films as *The Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vellee, 2013) and *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015), and the controversy over Jeffrey Tambor’s casting in *Transparent* (Joey Soloway, 2014-2019), this cultural moment demands that all of these voice acting roles be given fuller consideration so that asexual people may be cast in asexual roles. At the same time, it also encourages this representation of marginalized communities to also extend to the writer’s room and producing and directing roles (Mayer 2011; Newman and Levine 2012; Martin 2014, 2018, 2019, 2020; Warner 2017; Molina-Guzman 2018). Thus, representation itself onscreen isn’t the only thing that matters, but rather, it also matters who is telling the stories (via writing, producing, and directing, but also via other modes of storytelling such as costuming, casting, and setting). However, in this series, by allowing Todd to come out as an asexual, enabling his story to continue over multiple episodes, and by representing him as a multilayered, complex, and complicated character, *BoJack Horseman* is creating asexual community, resisting heteronormativity, and promoting asexual and queer visibility on television.

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Mediagraphy

Adventure Time (Cartoon Network, 2010-2018)

Big Mouth (Netflix, 2017-present)

Bob's Burgers (Fox, 2011-present)

BoJack Horseman (Netflix, 2014-2020)

Season 1, Episode 1, “The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One”

Season 3, Episode 2, “The BoJack Horseman Show”

Season 3, Episode 12, “That Went Well”

Season 4, Episode 3, “Hooray! Todd Episode!”

Season 5, Episode 3, “Planned Obsolescence”

Central Park (AppleTV+, 2020-present)

The Dallas Buyers Club (Jean-Marc Vellee, 2013)

The Danish Girl (Tom Hooper, 2015)

Dexter (Showtime, 2006-2013)

Family Guy (Fox, 1999-present)

House (Fox, 2004-2012)

Huge (ABC Family, 2010)

Law and Order: SVU (NBC, 1999-present)

The Montel Williams Show (CBS, 1991-2008)

Mysterious Skin (Gregg Araki, 2004)

The Problem with Apu (Michael Melamedoff, 2017)

She-Ra and the Princesses of Power (Netflix, 2018-2020)

The Simpsons (Fox, 1989-present)

South Park (Comedy Central, 1997-present)

Steven Universe (Cartoon Network, 2013-2020)

Transparent (Joey Soloway, 2014-2019)

Tuca and Bertie (Netflix, 2019)

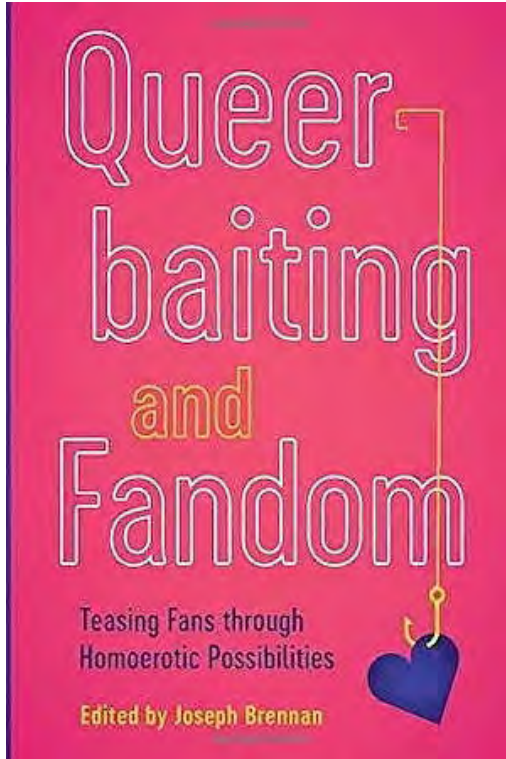
Undone (Amazon, 2019)

The View (ABC, 1997-present)

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Broadly, *queerbaiting* is when queer audiences believe to be watching content representative of their community, but are let down when the content is revealed to be anything but queer. The term *queerbaiting* is coined by queer fan activists who call media producers out on their misleading advertising or unfaithful storylines. In a comprehensive overview of this tricky marketing tactic, over 20 authors cover topics ranging from *queerbaiting* in art to *queerbaiting* in children's television.

Queerbaiting: an explanation of how a straight female almost bought a fabulous bed

review by [Christina H. Hodel](#)

Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Over Homoerotic Possibilities, edited by Joseph Brennan (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), \$50.

During an online search for the perfect bed, I was surprised and intrigued when my computer screen suddenly gleamed images of gay men advertising Walmart's new furniture line: "The Queer Eye Collection." In just a few clicks, cleverly worded product descriptions had me considering a Queer Eye bed for it claimed it is "fierce" and "radiates unadulterated modern class." Just what I need. But wait, is this bed meant for straight, cis-gendered females like myself or a "gawd" or "gawdess" as the description reads? In the homophobic society in which we still live, why use "queer" as a theme to sell furniture in the first place? But also, why not? To answer these questions, I turned to the beautifully crafted and expertly researched book *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Over Homoerotic Possibilities*, edited by Joseph Brennan. In analyzing the book, I am using an autoethnographic approach here and employ the Netflix series *Queer Eye* and its spinoff furniture line as a lens into queer televisual representation. Brennan's volume is not only enlightening and educational, but entertaining and thought-provoking. The book is an important intervention in queer studies and media. It elucidates on why content creators and fans should work to continue negotiating for more authentic representations and identity politics for doing so is a pragmatic effort towards equality. Hopefully, my textual analysis allows for understanding Brennan's manuscript to reveal that, indeed, it accomplishes its goal of assessing and expanding the very nuanced, fan-created term: *queerbaiting*.

The 256-page volume likens *queerbaiting* to "lip service" in that it is, "an avowal of advocacy, adherence, or allegiance expressed in words but not backed by deeds." It is characterized by

"a strategy designed to capture queer followings by suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then empathetically denying and laughing off the possibility" (Fathalla 491). [[open references in new window](#)]

Such covert marketing wherein the creator hints of gayness—thus enticing homosexual consumers—but fails to act on any intentions, is prominent in film and television. For example, a television series suggests a character's homosexuality via touching on camp/kitsch and coded references to gay culture, but the narrative ultimately does not explicitly address their sexuality. For example, Brennan opens with an anecdote about the television series

Supernatural (2005-) in which Castiel (Misha Collins) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) appear to be more than friends. However, the storyline does not progress to reveal any form of romantic relationship. Brennan views this as taking, “the form of pledging an allegiance to issues of queer visibility without actually delivering on such an allegiance in any tangible way” (1), and he posits that these actions have dire consequences.

While enticing gay viewers with potentially gay content and not following through with it seems harmless, and well within the kind of fantasy that marketing usually offers, there are far-reaching negative implications: queerbaiting is an exploitative marketing tactic used on a marginalized group (Brennan 2). Emma Nordin, one of the contributors, explains,

“It is described as benefitting producers at the expense of actively denying full queer representation, meaning producers benefit from what is perceived as hinting and teasing, but will not allow overt queer representation” (58).

Viewers are tuning in each week anticipating the promise of queer representation, but their desires are unmet all while creators (writers, producers, directors, actors, advertisers) profit from the viewers’ passive labor. According to Samantha Knowles of TheShorthorn.com, the implication is that queer people are more useful to get views rather than being used to share stories (N.P.). When heterosexuals queerbait, they are invalidating the experiences of coming out:

“You affirm the heteronormative nature of media, and you make people feel foolish for thinking they could trust you” explains Beckii Cruel (Lander-Boyce N.P.). Typical of marketing is capturing specific audience demographics. However, claiming to be an ally by appearing to present gay-themed material and not doing so is potentially problematic. “...when [creators] decide to get on board ‘a purpose’ and align with an aspect of society, they must be careful not to do it tokenistically. There has to be a reason for them to align that makes sense; otherwise, they risk alienating people as it will ring false” (Abraham N.P.).



Queer Eye Collection homepage banner: To the straight eye, “The Fab Fab” could be close brothers or friends. To the queer eye, the motley quintet of lifestyle coaches are gay “gawds.”

Challenging the unethical and apolitical mode of marketing is Brennan’s impetus for the book, which spans 21 informative essays divided into three sections:

- Theoretical perspectives,
- Popular case studies, and
- Wider contexts & aligned subjects.

The openly gay cast members of the Netflix series *Queer Eye* are the cover boys



The Leopold Bed "radiates unadulterated modern class." Can one assume that a bed described as "a sleep sanctuary fit for a 'gawd'" is being marketed to queers? Who knows? The bed will, "no doubt upgrade your bedroom' lewk" and who wouldn't want that?



Brennan posits that "'Queer' was reclaimed by queer theory in the 1990s and is now widely adopted in scholarship and the formation of identities, in much the same way that queerbaiting came to be repurposed by fans from the 2010s as a form of queer activism and is widely known today" (3).



Netflix's *Queer Eye* cast (Credit: Jerod Harris/Getty Images): For those in need of a life makeover, the Fab Five have you covered in all areas, hon! From left to right: Karamo Brown (culture expert), Bobby Berk (design expert), Tan

for Walmart's furniture collection. The reality program revolves around "the fab 5" as they give dramatic makeovers to dowdy—and usually straight—men in need of an upgrade in all things ranging from personal appearance to throw pillows. The marketing of the line is not overtly queerbaiting since all the designers are openly queer. Nonetheless, the references to male figure skating or removing one's wig after a long day—typical gay men tropes—entice customers into purchasing items. It is thus unclear if the line is marketed to the queer community, heterosexuals who find being gay to be in vogue, or another demographic entirely. Prior to streaming on Netflix, *Queer Eye* premiered on Bravo in 2003 as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* but has since broadened its title. Rachel Charlene Lewis of BitchMedia.com says the series caters towards mostly straight, white men or even gay men, but not lesbians—especially not lesbians of color. According to Mark Gallagher, "the 'queer eye' is for the straight guy" and is, "a tool for his use in self-improvement" (Gallagher 225), especially in terms of aiding straight men in heterosexual relationships.

Despite the series seeming to lack a gay audience, it indeed has a gay following. Many viewers identifying as queer watch *Queer Eye* for comfort, acceptance, and a sense of community, even indicating the series helped them come out to friends and family, thus giving them a confidence boost (Vary & Fuchs 120). The furniture line loosely acknowledges this indicating,

"Our goal is always to help people be the best version of themselves. This line brings the same notion home, with pieces that speak to who you are and how you feel" (Walmart.com).

Regardless of whom the line is tailored to, the queer community, a marginalized group, is being recognized in Walmart's *Queer Eye* Collection—but by their ability to pay, a presumed characteristic of gay men. This tactic is typical of queerbaiting (Arthurs 84). Such a pitch opens up issues of segregation and overshadows civil rights issues by the marketers' relying on certain viewers' financial strength or aspirations for upscale taste. According to Walmart.com, end tables average about \$43 while end tables from the *Queer Eye* Collection average about \$79. The gay domestics that Walmart may be marketing to are epitomized, for example, as

"affluent and middle class, and that his stylishness and trendiness is predicated on access to cultural capital and the ability to consume an array of products and services" (Gorman-Murray 435-436).

Queer Eye fans like "Ohemgeeskittles" on Reddit suggest the quintet probably had little agency in deciding which store carried their line, for it is likely Netflix agreed to a contract on their behalf (Ohemgeeskittles, N.P.). These are logical conclusions since Bobby Berk, the interior designer of the fab 5, is the type to defiantly exclaim, "Well, not on our watch, boys and girls," when being marketing to for his "pink dollars" or being queerbaited. In fact, queerbaiting discourse represents a crucial moment in fan activism. The term itself is a neologism emerging from fan forums and discussion. When it occurs on sites like Reddit, what results is fan activism leading to policing media content. Fans consume media and then,

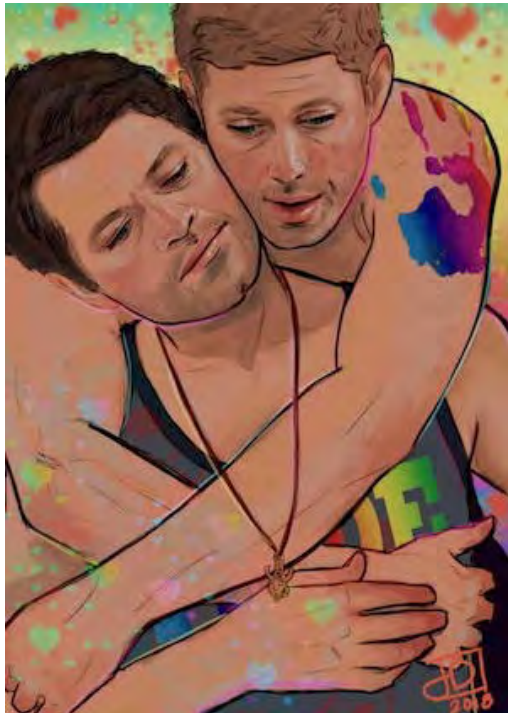
"debate and negotiate their meaning and interpretations and compare them to the assumed producers' meaning and intentions" (Nordin 16).

Fan communities call out content if they find it teasing audiences. Queerbaiting creates, "an imbalance of power and authority that, in an effort to criticize the intentional exploitation of audience's desire to see same-sex affection on-screen, places all control over the meaning of the text firmly in the hands and minds of 'the powers that be [content creators]'" (McDermott 139). Such occurrences indicate fans have gone from being passive consumers to queer activists.

France (fashion expert), Antoni Porowski (food and wine expert), and Jonathan Van Ness (grooming expert).



Bromance or romance? (Credit: Screenshot from *Supernatural*): Castiel (Misha Collins) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) embrace during a scene from the CW series *Supernatural* (2005-). Some, like queer activists, say the hug is hinting at a romance between the two. Others, like the series' stars, see the embrace as male bonding.



"Destial" pride (Credit: JackieDeeArt/Redbubble.com): You may have heard of Bennifer (Jennifer Garner and Ben Affleck) and Tomkat (Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes). I'd like to introduce you to "Destial" (Dean and Castiel) from *Supernatural*. This fan art by JackieDeeArt represents the hope of a romance between the series' two male characters. However, the fact it is for sale on [RedBubble.com](https://www.redbubble.com) may lead one to question if the image is purely fan devotion or a move to capture one's "pink dollars."

The introduction of *Queerbaiting* offers a fascinating history of queerbaiting by Brennan himself, as he describes the fan activism surrounding tricky advertising and narrative tactics. Fans calling out queerbaiting indicates their refusal to follow through on suggestions and utilizes various forms of regulating media content—here, for example, via mockery (Brennan 22). Such activism implies that the gay hints and innuendo in media are being picked up on mostly by homosexual viewers—and are unwelcome. LGBTQ representations in media have improved since the Hays Code, with broadcasters allowing for more overt representations. However, according to Elizabeth Bridges, "its punishing legacy can still be felt amid a media culture that reflects the Code's earliest aims," (116) hence the scriptwriters' reliance on coded references. Queer activists fighting these couched representations argue, in response, that queerbaiting makes LGBTQ characters nearly invisible by relegating their sexuality in particular to subtext (Bridges 116). Insulting as it may be to queer communities, film and television have often used gestures, jewelry, or other covert visual or verbal cues to identify one another in a world still not tolerant of them (Robb 146, 151). Queerbaiting could be viewed as just another one of these nods.

According to Brennan and the book's contributors, straight consumers are not supposed to notice these insinuations of gayness. Still, they do notice and interpret these cues and are either not affected by them or, if anti-gay, are angered by them (Borgerson 960, UM 465, 461). E. J. Nielsen covers this dual possibility in depth in the chapter "The Gay Elephant Meta in the Room: *Sherlock* and the Johnlock Conspiracy." Heterosexual viewers of the British crime television series *Sherlock* (2010-2017) may see Detective Sherlock and his doctor partner, Watson, as friends or co-workers. Queers may pick up the cues seen in the script—and even the wallpaper—that indicate the duo are more than friends (Nielsen in Brennan 84), making pinpointing instances of queerbaiting a problematic task due to the flexibility of how viewers, and thus future consumers, read imagery.

While some fans insist queerbaiting is clearly in use, often producers deny engaging in such a practice and thus they anger those fans convinced of its existence. In the above instance, for example, *Sherlock*'s producers vehemently denied queerbaiting or that the protagonists were gay (Nielsen in Brennan, 84-85). According to Brennan in this regard, it may never be evident if a producer is intentionally queerbaiting since homosexuality regularly is associated with certain narrative elements. The western and buddy genres of film are two examples Brennan provides. In addition, movies centered on stereotypical male-centric subjects like competitive sports and war invite interpretations of homosexuality. Also, plots often have "situational homosexuality," a term which describes "temporary and often isolated homosexual behaviors, rather than constituted identities, and long-term practices" (Brennan 6). Such occurrences may often be found in narratives relating to "prison, barracks, naval vessels, and boarding schools" (Escoffier 531).

Returning to Nielsen's *Sherlock* analysis, the story is based on male-dominated law enforcement, hence providing moments for inviting interpretations of homosexuality. Across the show's narrative trajectory, despite one episode in which John Watson claims he nor Sherlock are gay, and in which Sherlock claims he is married to his work, fans have insisted that the absence of women in most of the series is a hint toward queerness (Nielsen in Brennan 85). To complicate matters, as Monique Franklin in Chapter 2, "Queerbaiting, Queer Readings, and Heteronormative Viewing Practices" indicates, queer identity itself is fluid and permeable. Perhaps in what some consider queerbaiting, the creators, overtly or subconsciously, merely were trying to represent the "troubled binary distinctions of identity boundaries" (Franklin in Brennan 45). Actively finding examples of authentic queerbaiting presents challenges, and this is a topic which takes up a good part of the book.



Straight Ally Flag (Credit: www.unco.edu): While producers may argue they incorporate gay-themed content into programming, some queer activists see their alleged efforts as “slactivism” or shallow activism.

In addition to the scenarios mentioned above, critics/screenwriters/directors may use a concept of *naturalization*, a belief that genuine homoeroticism exists in certain circumstances and is merely natural. Brennan acknowledges these various scenarios with an example from *Merlin* (2008-2012). The show’s producer, Johnny Capps explains how a scene of two men fighting with swords, for instance, automatically conjures phallic images and homoeroticism (6). Careful consideration should be taken before endorsing texts as reliably portraying either homosexuality or queerbaiting as these texts are polysemic and undergo substantial mediation from their creation to their reception. While certain situations may produce a good condition for a queer reading, one must not forget yet another scenario may be occurring: heterobaiting.

In my Walmart shopping expedition, as a straight woman considering putting the “sleek and bold” Queer Eye bed in my home to “upgrade [my] bedroom ‘lewk,’”— I could not help but wonder if *I’m* being-baited. Heterobaiting is the opposite of queerbaiting: one thinks they are viewing media featuring heterosexuals, only to be made aware the characters are homosexuals (Carcus in Brennan 60). In such instances, straight audiences tune in to what later morphs into gay content. To those unaware of the *Queer Eye* series or the term queer, they may not pick up on the sexuality of the collection’s designers. Walmart does not portray the men in same-sex relationships, use queer signifiers such as rainbows, or put words like “gay,” “homosexual,” “same-sex,” and “pride,” in their advertising. Again, to the uninitiated, the furniture collection may not render any hints of queerness. Should the line depict, for example, the Fab 5’s Tan France with his husband, Rob France, Walmart’s straight viewers might be surprised by the coupling.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Figure skating and other gay men tropes (Credit: Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images): Adam Rippon is the first openly gay man representing the US for an Olympic sport—figure skating. Figure skating and other tropes typically associated with gay men pepper the *Queer Eye* Collection's furniture descriptions.



Queer Eye for queer girls? Not really (Credit: Netflix). To better understand the *Queer Eye* Collection, a look at the television series is needed. Expert analysis reveals how Netflix's *Queer Eye* is meant for dowdy, white, straight men, but on rare occasions, lesbians of color, as pictured here.

Each of *Queerbaiting's* three sections contains chapter-length investigations and a handful of accompanying “thought pieces,” short observations, or related developments concerning the section’s topics. They add much complexity to the book and the richness of considering the topic of queerbaiting. Leyre Carcus’ thought piece entitled, “‘Heterobaiting’: *Black Sails* and the Subversion of Queerbaiting Tropes,” describes the narrative tactics tricking heterosexuals into watching queer content. Carcus explains how the Hulu series *Black Sails* (2014–2017) [[open references in new window](#)] lets audiences assume they are watching a program geared towards heterosexuals. There are hints that male and female characters share romantic interests. A lesbian sex scene with a straight male gaze further indulges heterosexual male viewers. As the series progresses, a validated homosexual relationship among characters initially portrayed as straight surprises many viewers. Now, in this instance, mainstream audiences are the media’s bait as the queer narrative is validated (Carcus in Brennan 71). In such occurrences, straight spectators, particularly the homophobic ones, feel betrayed since characters they liked and admired become overtly homosexual (Lothian in Gray 238–252). Carcus persuasively argues there are detrimental effects to heterobaiting: anger and increased homophobia by fans (Carcus in Brennan 61). Unlike their queer counterparts in TV viewership—who have a long history of navigating subtexts and are accustomed to being denied representation, non-queer viewers—who are used to being marketed to and having their desires met—are not equipped with coping strategies to deal with such plot twists. The result is audience frustration and the series’ adding to some straight viewers’ fraught views of homosexuality (61). With vivid examples and fluid writing, Carcus explains that the change from storylines about seemingly straight characters to overtly gay ones could also be positive. In this case, *Black Sails* has an ambiguous ending open for interpretation. The choose-your-own-adventure style finale is a sort of invitation to alternative narratives traditionally left untold.

Another perspective deals with actors and creators and their narratives; perhaps it is best if a person tells the story of televisual sexuality rather than have it play out on a television series. Joseph Brennan and Michael McDermott posit that to find the “meaning” of a text, we must turn to someone claiming knowledge of it. A celebrity is one such entity, and Brennan and McDermott discuss this topic in-depth in the chapter “Celebrity Queerbaiting.” In terms of celebrity queerbaiting,

“the authentic meaning is centered around a person and that person’s sexuality. Therefore, access to that ‘truth,’ while debated, lies solely within the celebrity in question, whose authoritative knowledge exacerbates notions of intentionality and exploitation” (123).

When analyzing queer images of stars like straight singer/actor Nick Jonas, whom the chapter focuses on, Brennan and McDermott analyze the queer meanings produced by the individual, and how queer audiences interpret and use these messages. On the one hand, by “appropriating gay culture,” celebrities enjoy broadening their fan base and engaging in the LGBTQ community as an ally via the queer image they project. Yet on the other hand, they do not need to face the negative social implication of being gay (Brennan and McDermott 125). Examples of Jonas’ queerbaiting include him performing at gay clubs and also participating in a steamy fashion shoot reminiscent of a 1992 Calvin Klein ad featuring Mark “Marky” Wahlberg that appealed to the gay community.



Wearing your heart on your sleeve...or your hanky in your back pocket (Credit: www.queerevents.ca): According to www.queerevents.ca, colored bandanas were worn by gay men as part "of a system of coded messages signaling an individual's sexual proclivities, tastes, and kinks: 'the hanky code.'" Perhaps queerbaiting could be viewed as just another one of these nods the queer community has used in a world still not entirely tolerant of them.



The message is in the damask wallpaper (Credit: BBC): Heterosexual viewers of the British crime television series *Sherlock* (2010-2017) may see Detective Sherlock and his doctor partner, Watson, as just friends or co-workers. Queers may pick up the cues seen in the script—and even the wallpaper—indicating the duo are more than just friends (Nielsen in Brennan 84), making pinpointing instances of queerbaiting a problematic task due to the flexibility of how consumers read imagery.

Jonas has acknowledged the gay community many times, such as addressing them after the 2016 Pulse Nightclub (a gay nightclub) shooting in Orlando, Florida, or at a press conference where he acknowledged appreciation for his gay fans and their admiration for him as their sexy poster boy (Brennan 137). Celebrity queerbaiting infuriates some fans, however, who do not see the projected allyship as genuine, rather an attempt at exploiting them for their pink dollars. The authors' study reveals how other gay men do not mind "being used" and demand even more queer imagery from Jonas to satisfy their desires. This ambivalence indicates that queer fans see what Jonas is doing as pandering to the gay community as exploitation, but not exploitation *against* it (127). The authors conclude that deciding if a celebrity is queerbaiting or not can be determined by their stake in the issue. If LGBTQ issues truly affect Jonas, then he is not queerbaiting. Alas, this is not the case—he is a straight man—there is no true allyship here, only queerbaiting. Whether or not Jonas can continue to queerbait remains in question. His fans have noted that more recent images do not portray him with the chiseled body they once lusted over. Perhaps they should find something new to lust over, and at Walmart.com there seems to be no shortage of eye candy.

Back to my shopping expedition. "Sleek," "gorgeous," "coordinated," "clean," and "elegant" describes a retro-inspired accent chair offering "nothing but the best for you and your tush." Many of the furniture descriptions from the Queer Eye Collection are eroticized or at least personify inanimate objects. There is a "to-be-looked-at-ness" at play here as well as instances of coded queerness. In the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, in an attempt to appear healthy and disease-free, a gay male ideal of beauty was born (Wood 54). "The ideal body image became increasingly pubescent and clean-cut, resulting in the idealization of the smooth, hairless body" (Signorile 68) not unlike Jonas'...or the furniture described in the ads.

Brennan and McDermott's chapter alludes to the gaze, a theory conceptualized by Laura Mulvey. Mulvey identified a male spectator relation to a female image as being one of identification and power (Mulvey 6-18). There is also a gay male gaze in which males are encouraged to look at other men carefully (Mitchell 43). But another issue to consider that Brennan and McDermott do not mention is that perhaps the supposed gay erotica is actually geared to heterosexual women. Divya Garg, author of the chapter "Queerbaiting and Beyond: Japanese Popular Culture and Queer Politics," discusses this phenomenon.

According to Garg, queerness in Japanese society is uncommon even in the "shoujo" romance genre which proves a market for queer content about male/male love—it is for straight women. The idea stems from *fujoshi*, a Japanese term that roughly translates to "rotten girls." As Garg explains, the phenomenon that is *fujoshi* culture may be imagined as functioning like a straight male gaze in pornographic material featuring two women—but genderwise the opposite. In *fujoshi* culture, two men engage in homosexual behavior, and the primary demographic for this content is female (Garg in Brennan 164-165). The girls are "rotten" because they are enthusiastic about *yaoi*, a genre of fan-produced fiction and art, usually manga, positioning male characters from commercial fiction and



Flashes of fervor in boarding school (Credit: Tom Grace/The Guardian): Theater is associated with the gay community, just as boarding schools, prisons, and navel barracks are. Some situations are so inscribed with gay undertones that such “situational homosexuality” makes pinpointing queerbaiting difficult. Here, Daniel Mack Shand and Darragh Cowly test their feelings for one another in *Bare: A Pop Opera*. The coming-of-age musical follows schoolboys in a catholic boarding school and their “flashes of fervor”.



Another Green World (Credit: Anton Kern Gallery, New York): Another Green World is a 2015 painting by Nicole Eisman representing how gender and the queer identity is fluid and permeable. Perhaps what some consider queerbaiting, is merely representing the “troubled binary distinctions of identity boundaries” (Franklin in Brennan 45), making actively finding examples of authentic queerbaiting as abstract as the painting.

art into unintended romantic relationships (Galbraith 212). This concept is similar to “slash” fiction outside Japan (Jenkins XXIV, Pagliassotti 59-60).

While *fujoshi* culture is akin to the reverse of queerbaiting, Garg explains how *yaoi* and *shounen ai* are more along the lines of Brennan’s definition. Known as “Boys’ Love,” *yaoi* and *shounen ai* are a narrative commonly found in anime and manga about male-male romance, but in which the characters do not see themselves as gay (McKelland et al. 3). Furthermore, these narratives are also popular among straight females (Zanghellini 279). The focus on male same-sex relationships is explained by arguing that “young female fans feel more able to imagine and depict idealized strong free characters if they are male” (Kinsella 302). The argument is that women are repressed in society, and they fantasize of a life of freedom and opportunity—something the male characters embody (Kinsella 302).

Perhaps it is the desire to escape repression that drives *fujoshi* women to embody a role beyond consumer. These women are quite active as producers as well. “If *fujoshi* are unsatisfied with the phallocentrism and heteronormativity they see in the media mix, they create their own versions of official narratives...” (Hemmann 5.2). This phenomenon is a part of fan service, for it rewards viewers with erotic content, yet it promotes sales and aids in maintaining viewer loyalty.

Despite Japan’s seemingly openness towards gay media portrayals, heterosexual paradigms are replicated in the narratives mentioned above by demonstrating male/female or dominant/submissive stereotypes. These paradigms are further means of reductively representing the LGBTQ community even though these portrayals are not queerbaiting per se. Nonetheless, the genre caused critique among the community for it, “does not deliver faithfully to the depictions and desires of LGBTQ+ audiences (Garg in Brennan 165).

To complicate the issue, the negative aspects of queerbaiting are international in that trickery and manipulation are a part of marketing worldwide, but there is an upside. Garg describes an anime series called *Free! Iwatobi Swim Club* (2013), in which queerbaiting results in “shipping” and later the formation of celebratory communities. Shipping refers to rooting for the pairing of two fictional characters into a romantic relationship. While shippers may come together forming a community of like-minded fans, shipping “can be a highly contentious fan activity that leads to disputes within fandoms as shippers attempt to regulate ships and the ways in which fans go about shipping them” (Gonzalez 1.1). This is not unlike what happens in slash fanfiction communities. Slash fanfiction is, “a particular type of writing driven by queer themes where cisnormative and heteronormative (cis/heteronormative) source content is transformed to include queer characters, relationships, and storylines” (Floegel 735).

Using popular television as an example, Constance Penley—when discussing slash fiction—mentions the, “hostility that many ‘regular’ *Star Trek* fans have shown toward slashers” (140). “Trekkers” are uncomfortable with “Slashers” alluding to a romantic relationship with Kirk and Spock because, “it is not only sexually but politically scary, with its overt homoeroticism throwing into sharp relief the usually invisible homosocial underpinnings of Trekdom, the Federation, and US culture” (Penley141).

Unlike Penley’s findings mentioned here, Garg explains how in many instances of shipping, if a series meets the audience’s expectations and two characters romantically link just as the fans hoped for, communal celebrations occur. Garg views this fan culture as a welcomed shift in portrayals of gays in Japanese media despite the “still-prevalent conservatism and censorship in Japanese culture...” (Garg in Brennan 166).



Erotic unsheathing (Credit: BBC): *Merlin* (2008-2012) producer Johnny Capps suggests that a scene of two men fighting with swords conjures phallic images and homoeroticism (Brennan 6). Before endorsing texts as reliably portraying homosexuality or queerbaiting, one must consider that these texts are polysemic and undergo substantial mediation.



Black Sails and heterobaiting (Credit: Starz): A lesbian sex scene with a straight male gaze further indulges heterosexual male viewers. As the series progresses, a validated homosexual relationship among characters initially portrayed as straight surprises viewers. Now, mainstream viewers are the media's bait as the queer narrative is validated (Carcas 71).

Having read Garg's chapter, I realized what might as well be an online community of satisfied purchasers and reviewers on Walmart.com were practically "shipping" for me to buy the bed. "You won't regret it" and, "a must-buy for anyone who wants to be in the now. Get it!" read the five-star reviews—causing me to put the bed in my shopping cart. The fab five are inclusive of families, who mention in their reviews, for example, the stain-free and child-friendly upholstery used on Walmart products.



Queering *Adventure Time*... It's about time too! (Credit: Cartoon Network). In 2018, *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) announced the same-sex relationship between Marceline the Vampire Queen and Princess Bubblegum in the series finale...something fans had been waiting to hear for over half a decade. The kissing scene between the two characters indicates a broader television trend: that perhaps queerbaiting is losing its zeal in exchange for more elicited queer representation.

In particular, the effects of queerbaiting do influence young consumers, and here children's television plays a role. Implied homosexuality in youth programming such as *Arthur* (1996-present), *Gravity Falls* (2012-2016), and *Good Luck, Charlie* (2010-2014), among others, is not novel (Dennis 738); and *Queerbaiting* does not fail to address this. Bridget Blodgett and Anastasia Salter write a much-needed chapter: "What Was Missing From Children's Television: Queerbaiting and Homoromantic Exclusion In *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe*." Blodgett and Salter argue how romantic relations on television model possibilities for children's future. Still, few representations offer homosexual models, thus classifying children into one identity: a heterosexual one. This echoes what Adrienne Rich referred to in her 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Rich asserts that heterosexuality is a political institution in that it assumes heterosexuality on individuals and provides no other cultural messages indicating alternative options. Homosexual or transgender identity formation generally begins in early childhood. With little, if any, models regarding these core issues, LGBTQ images in the media are particularly important as they have a socializing influence on young people's identity development (Kelso 1059-1060).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Showing off his Calvins (Credit: Yo Tsai/ *Flaunt* and Calvin Klein): To appeal to his gay fan base, straight singer/actor Nick Jonas mimics Mark Wahlberg's famous 1992 ad directed to gay audiences.



"Rotten" women: In *fujoshi* culture, two men engage in homosexual behavior, and the primary demographic for this content are females (Garg in Brennan 164-165). The girls are "rotten" because they are enthusiastic about *yaoi*, a genre of fan-produced fiction and art, usually manga, positing male characters from commercial fiction and art into unintended romantic relationships (Galbraith 212). This concept is similar to "slash" fiction outside Japan (Jenkins XXIV; Pagliassotti 59-60).

If queerbaiting, as Brennan indicates, is homoerotic subtext never actualized on-screen that accrues benefits from a queer supporting audience, how does this translate to what is occurring in children's television? It doesn't, at least not precisely. One of the complexities taken up in this anthology is that appears to be queerbaiting is not always about dollars; "it can be a means of inclusion in defiance of norms or marketing" (Blodgett and Salter in Brennan 154). [\[open references in new window\]](#) The difference with queerbaiting in youth programming compared to adult programming is that the subtexts are not erotic, they are romantic. Here producers have different goals: navigating a new frontier of visibility politics.

While queerbaiting in children's media is meant to encourage children to value same-sex relationships, Blodgett and Salter indicate a double standard undermining the tactic. Television programs featuring straight couples often portray these couples hugging, kissing, and procreating—something implied gay characters never do. Creators of children's programming address the importance of queer representation with their "Easter eggs" and "token gays," as the authors word it. Still, due to censorship or unwillingness to challenge societal paradigms, homosexuality is never truly actualized, thus sending a message—same-sex relationships are a tier below (Blodgett and Salter in Brennan 150).

If you have been "shipping" for me to buy the Queer Eye bed, I promise I have not been baiting you when I finally reveal that I ended up never buying it. My decision has nothing to do with the queer marketing, but my objective in satisfying my aesthetic preferences. To reach this decision, I put the bed in context, looking at earlier trends and emerging ones to find the design that best fit my home décor at the current moment. This is not unlike *Queerbaiting's* aims. Brennan states,

"This is the first book on queerbaiting, and therefore the essays perform important work in *situating* the concept...a central aim of the book is to put in context(s), a term that is both of the now, and thus timely, but also underscored by ideas that have a longer history..." (19).

The book's aim is accomplished via its structure in which the term *heterobaiting* is examined through chapters covering theory, pop culture, and aligned/wider subjects. In so doing, the book produces a vast knowledge of various possible considerations of the term and its influence. With authors like Emma Nordin and Monique Franklin applying theoretical concepts to the term *queerbaiting*, readers learn how queerbaiting is a transnational problem and presents queer people as victims. Knowledge produced using popular case studies highlights, for example, "bisexual panic," which contributor Emily Roach defines as the threat one feels when having to confront potential homosexuality. A plethora of possibilities are accentuated by this exploring of the queerbaiting phenomenon and begs for further research. This research is carried out by authors such as Guillaume Sirois and Danielle S. Girard, among others who discuss producer-audience relationships. At this historical moment, creators, fans, and the texts are all imbricated, and *Queerbaiting and Fandom* underscores this mixture and its effects with varied essays.

I wonder if the coded references made me (at least subconsciously) feel like I was buying something from a group from which I am an outsider. I conclude that it



The love of a young boy: Literally meaning “the love of a young boy,” such narratives revolve around young adolescent boys and their struggles with love—often not heteronormative love. Female fans enjoy such stories by projecting their fantasies onto the male characters.



Shipping towards the Swim Club (Credit: Manga Fantaic607/ DeviantArt.com): This fan-created meme portrays the many possibilities in which relationships could unfold in the series *Free! Iwatobi Swim Club* (2013). Based on the multicolored lines, fans are mostly hoping to see a same-sex relationship develop.

will never be apparent to whom the furniture collection is geared towards, but I could see the big-box retailer’s acknowledging the United States’ evolving mass-market trend, which encompasses a kaleidoscope of subcultures. From one perspective, we could consider that such gay advertising functions to “empower gay consumers by not only validating the gay community but also by assimilating gay men and lesbians through normalization and reducing the salience of stigmatic subcultural distinctiveness” (Wan-Hsiu, 94).

The Queer Eye Collection of furniture does lack a few key pieces, such as an entertainment center and armoire. *Queerbaiting* is an incredibly comprehensive book covering topics ranging from video games to fan art to song contests, but, like the furniture collection, it misses a few marks. *Queerbaiting* neglects to delve into those fans who love the thrill of the tease that queerbaiting offers. For example, “r/Killing Eve” is a community on Reddit.com, “dedicated to discussing all things *Killing Eve*: A BBC American Drama Television Series.” Redditors such as Chaoswalking 984 say the baiting is, “what makes it interesting” and “we don’t know who these characters really are just yet,” but waiting to see what will manifest itself is part of the fun.

The book concentrates heavily on queerbaiting as a means of ridicule. It does not tackle other, more optimistic, aspects of queerbaiting, such as how it protects writers from a homophobic or sexist climate. Beyond that, in terms of creative process, procedures of concealment are exciting devices for shaping symbolism, characters, plot, and narrative situations. Such skillful manipulation in storytelling is, “not meant to exclude; it might be meant in the first place to produce a good reading” (Calinescu 445)—or a stimulating and intellectual reading, something else the manuscript does not cover.

This book uniquely situates itself at the intersections of sexuality, representation, the market, and fandom. While the focus of the book is on how queer activism against commercially motivated queer baiting developed in online fan communities for television series, situating these topics in comparison to others like print advertising and literature would have helped readers better understand the adverse consequences of queerbaiting as it relates to representation and visibility. Most of the book discusses the trickery and exploitation involved in queerbaiting and resulting fan anger and activism. It does not further analyze how baiting strategies suggest the conflicting intersection of increased tolerance and inclusion of gays and lesbians and their demotion to second-class citizen status.

Also neglected by the authors is this thought: queerbaiting might be for anti-gays. Indeed, queerbaiting is at least a momentary escape from the tyranny of heterosexism since it is some kind of nod that queers exist. After all, “entering popular culture is undeniably an important political objective for a marginalized group in terms of visibility” (Peters 194). Producing and widely distributing representations, “ultimately foster greater access to, and validation of, gay subjectivities” (Peters 195). Nonetheless, entry into popular culture also signals a moment of commodification, but for the homophobic. While queerbaiting undoubtedly is exploiting a group already marginalized, another view posits the radical idea that the tongue-in-cheek marketing tactic is meant to entice homophobic viewers. This notion undoubtedly changes Brennan’s definition of queerbaiting, but brings to light an alternative view of queerbaiting having nothing to do with fans.



Ruby proposes to sapphire on *Steven Universe* (Credit: Cartoon Network): *Steven Universe* is Cartoon Network's first-ever animated series created by a woman (Rebecca Sugar) who happens to identify as queer. The series is groundbreaking in that it portrays celebratory images of female characters in love with one another, women in tuxedos, boys in dresses, and non-binary people.



"Bisexual Panic" ([DeadlyPeachTree/Wattpad.com](https://www.wattpad.com/story/1234567890)): On Wattpad.com, an online storytelling platform, user DeadlyPeachTea posts a story about a bisexual woman. The woman panicked when pinned between a woman and a man in a crowded space and experienced attraction towards the other female. The idea of bi-sexual panic presents queers as victims forced to confront their homosexuality when they do not want to or are not yet ready—a concept discussed in *Queerbaiting and Fandom*.

Reddit user, Aceoangels, says that gay undertones in media anger straight, homophobic consumers—or tap into what some believe are a homophobe's repressed same-sex desires. The more anti-gay advocates get online and circulate the ads to gain support in stopping them, the more exposure the ads receive. Again, the volume does not cover such alternative ways of positioning queerbaiting, allowing the definition to get a bit lost in all the nuance.

Nonetheless, *Queerbaiting and Fandom* is contributing so much to the field. Queer studies began with Michael Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in 1979 and later Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990. Foucault saw sexuality as private and mostly related to reproduction, although there were public political and social arenas, especially religion, in which it played a part. Using constructionism and a psychoanalytic model, Butler expands on these notions in her work by saying individuals gain a sense of their identities by performing them. Brennan adds to the discussion in terms of considering how performing queerness is directly related to Marxism.

Brennan's book is in line with earlier scholars such as Gayle Rubin who wrote works like *Thinking Sex* (1984), which opened up conversations about how sex and sexuality can be used against individuals, thus leading to oppression. Of course, Rubin's work is inspired by Mary Douglas' 1966 work *Purity and Danger*. Douglas' work deciphers what is regarded as dirt by society. She concludes that dirt is "matter out of place" (36)—just like homosexual characters in television. Rubin expands on this notion by examining how various social groups attribute binaries such as "good" and "bad" to sexuality. Homosexuality would be outside the "charmed circle" of sexuality and thus face opposition (153), something made evident in media, thus the need to queerbait in order to not exclude the heterosexual demographic.

Around the same time, in 1983, John D'Emilio was writing about the emergence of gay liberation in tandem with economics in *Capitalism and Gay Identity*, in which he states that once gay individuals could support themselves, they no longer had to be financially reliant on families, and less reliance on families meant more freedom. Brennan's work expands on these predecessors by stressing both the exploitation and agency that queerbaiting ignites in activists. Queers are a group of people claiming their place in the world.

In particular, Brennan's book is in dialogue with two other recent books. In *Black Queer Freedom: Spaces of Injury and Paths of Desire*, GerShun Avilez writes about potential avenues for black queer freedom in homophobia, racism, and politics, and how it stands in the way of civil rights and social mobility. Avilez details how black queer individuals live with being perceived as a threat and are thus restrained by institutions—a concept not unlike queerbaiting in which queerness is repressed. Finally, Julia Himberg provides an overview of some of the ways television constructs sexuality, sexual identity, and sexual politics in *The New Gay for Pay: The Sexual Politics of American Television*. Himberg sheds light on instances of overt homosexuality on television used only as "gay for pay"—or exploitative profiting. Like Brennan she sees creators of gay for pay programming necessary to study for they contribute to viewer's ideas about sexuality.

Queerbaiting and Fandom situates itself in line with the history of queer representation and how queerness is often masked—but occasionally celebrated—



The suspense is killing me! (Credit: BBC): Some, such as fans of the BBC series *Killing Eve*, enjoy the thrill of being baited. Not knowing what will happen with the lead female characters and their “will they or won’t they” romance is all part of the pleasurable viewing experience.

in media. It does its best to define queerbaiting and its role as a component of fan activism. Brennen brings to the forefront insincere aspects of media and marketers’ abuse of power, while also discussing aspects of “hiddenness” that are useful or bring pleasure to some in the queer community.

Queerbaiting and Fandom comes when some see queerness as chic and representing a contemporary lifestyle consisting of tolerance and individuality (Simpson, Iley, D. Brennan). Readers will walk away from this timely book with a new perspective in that they will see how, despite what appears to be a more substantial and more prevalent change in societal attitudes surrounding queer issues (Himberg 4), queerness is still taboo. The articulately written manuscript raises much-needed awareness to the practice of queerbaiting as well as offers different perspectives and vivid examples that help in understanding the issues.

Queerbaiting and Fandom is insisting that, “queer people can be better represented in today’s media” (22). I see this ground-breaking manuscript useful in undergraduate and graduate classrooms. The book asks us to be aware of our desire to impress ourselves upon a text, to assume certain media as queerbaiting, and to be aware of the perils of such insincere marketing. It is of interest to those in the humanities, gender and sexuality studies, media studies and fandom studies; the general public; and those who just want a fabulous read.



Not a perfect 10 (Credit: [Youtube.com/UberEats](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UberEats)): Olympic Gymnast Simone Biles was denounced for appearing in an Uber Eats commercial with non-binary *Queer Eye* star Johnathan Van Ness. One Million Moms, an arm of The Family Research Council, criticized Bile, but especially Van Ness, for what they deem as pushing a gay agenda. As the saying “any publicity is good publicity” goes, the commercial, which features Van Ness wearing Biles’ leotard, has garnered nearly 4 million views on YouTube.

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Jack and Joëlle, Queer TV conference, Montréal, 2019.

The futures of queer televisions

by [Jack Halberstam](#) with Joëlle Rouleau

Jack Halberstam: Good afternoon. I'm Jack Halberstam, a professor of English and gender studies at Columbia University. And I'm excited to be talking to you about queer television today.

Joëlle Rouleau: We are looking at this paradox of queer television about 'what's happening with television?' or 'what's happening with queer and trans identities regarding television?'

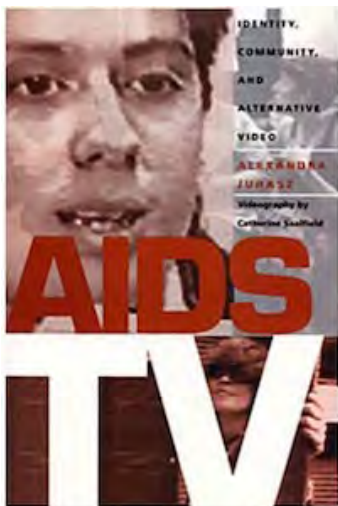
JH: If you think back, I don't know maybe 10 years, it seemed like television was going into a decline. Netflix primarily functioned as a service to deliver movies into people's homes, and it seemed possible that people wouldn't go to cinemas any longer. They'd just stay home and watch a range of pre-selected products. Then along came streaming platforms to revitalize TV. This shift has had good and bad implications for the representation of queer and trans bodies.

The technologies through which queer and trans lives have been represented has always been important. Going back to the 1990's if you think about a book like Alex Juhasz's *AIDS TV*, we see the confluence between the AIDS crisis and the hand-held camera. For that reason, there were multiple documentaries of the activism associated with the AIDS crisis. Portable cameras allowed in later years for films, but also on-the-spot material to circulate about the kind of political action that people were taking in response to an indifferent government around this health crisis. So, going back some twenty, thirty years, we can see that the platform for representation has had massive implications for the way queers and trans lives are represented.

In the context of television's new era of popularity, we might ask about what difference it makes to turn to the small screen, the private screen, the home-centered screen or even the hand-held screen. Film has always been an ambiguous genre for queer representation—the history of cinema is, after all, the history of censorship. However, queer cinema did emerge in the 1990's as a vital, experimentally rich mode of representation—but just as quickly, it became a route to mainstream representation for LGT figures and stories.

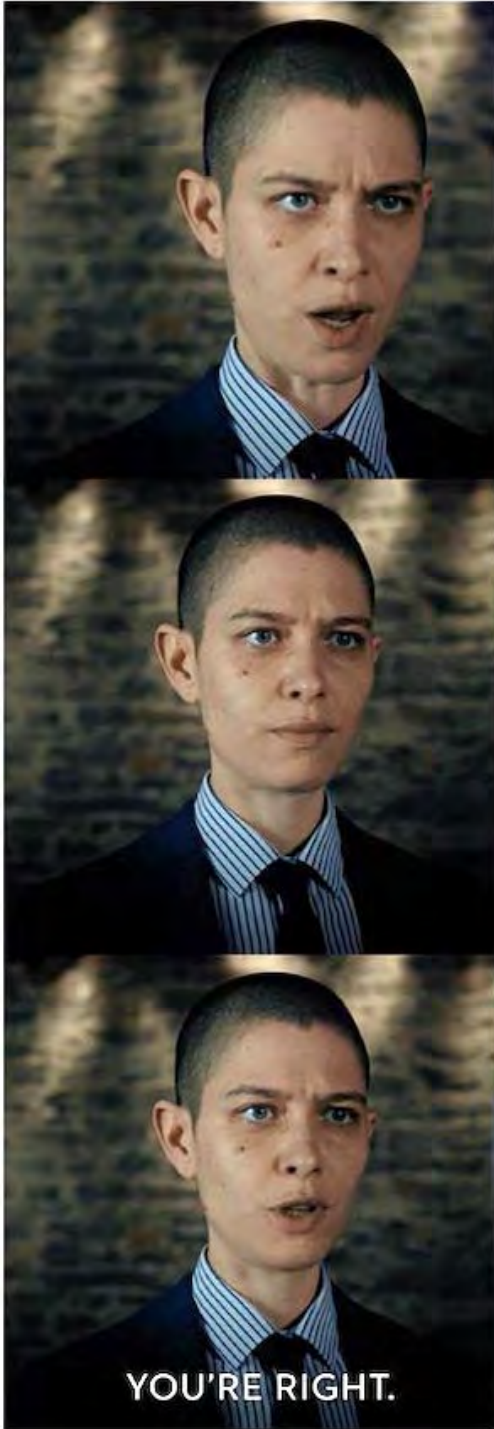
So new format, new representational potential, new platform, good and bad outcomes— that would be of sort of my take away.

Let's continue along this line. One thing to remember is that back in the 70s when TV stepped up its level of popularity as a form of media— electronic media (I guess electric media)—is that a lot of alternative communities hated TV and the television became a sign of corporate dominance. I remember watching *Times Square*, a queer film in the early 80s about two runaway girls who hung out together in NYC and, one of their signature acts of rebellion was to push old TV's off roof tops. *Kill your TV* was a punk slogan in the 1970s. So, in songs like "TV Killed the Radio", the idea is that with each new platform, the old platform is sort



(Above) "Why and how video has become the

medium for so much AIDS activism [...] How is this work different from mainstream television? How does it alter what we think of the media's form and function?" — Alex Juhasz, 1995
(Below) *WE CARE: A Video for Careproviders of People Affected by AIDS and A WAVE Taster*, Juhasz, 1990.



"I'm pretty sure there's only money. And it can buy all those things—or, at least, the same result." — Taylor Amber Mason in *Billions*.

of a nostalgically endowed with the warm glow of an earlier era when media was simpler, and we were less manipulated and all of that. So, we might have expected that by now television would have fallen into that happily nostalgic category of a media form that is over and done with and fondly remembered. Instead, what's happened, and this is super interesting, is that radio and TV, older media, have exponentially developed and grown and alongside all of the digital media. Television is an amazingly versatile form that—probably because of the ubiquity and the flexibility of digital platforms— has been reconditioned for a new era.

JR: Let's just jump on that: What are the possibilities offered by series that portray trans-identities and representation? How does this flexibility, offered by seriality, affect how we represent something? Some series experiment with very complex storylines and can do so because they have the time, because they can develop this complex world.

JH: Exactly as you say, television can do something that film can't do right now because it offers longer duration—serialized narratives for example, in which multiple plots lines can develop at once and narratives can twist and turn. In fact, people get deeply addicted to television series in ways reminiscent of the serialized literary forms of early industrial capitalism. The serial form pioneered in the 19th century was designed literally to seduce readership through the use of a narrative structure that would peak, create a cliffhanger, resolve, then build again, peak, cliffhanger, resolve. And truthfully a lot of the TV that we watch now rises and falls to these same rhythms while maybe lacking the courage to really commit to the cliff-hanger—especially in an era of tell-all/spoiler websites. But the drama of serial unfolding is very much a part of contemporary long-form shows, beginning with *The Wire* and *The Sopranos* but continuing to British procedurals like *Broadchurch* and *Happy Valley* and then being given a real work out in fantastic new work such as Michaela Cole's *I May Destroy You*—a truly inventive, daring and, yes, destructive show in which the main character unravels, hallucinates, collapses and then manages to wreak revenge upon her abuser all while unmaking the genre itself.

In a television series, you can tell much more complicated stories, slowly, and you can avoid being limited to good or bad versions of any given character. In the past, in cinema, as a result of the Production Code era, gays and trans figures were required to be represented within a moral framework; it had to be clear that the film within which they appear considers them abhorrent, immoral, and corrupt figures. You had a kind of moral universe in which the queer or the trans person had to be bad. And then, almost by way of correction, new LGBT films tried to offer impossibly “good” or positive characters. Neither one of those is desirable for the representation of, you know, what we might call complex personhood.

JR: Exactly. There's something to be afraid of in this over-celebrating of positive representation.

JH: Absolutely, and you were mentioning the gender-queer character of Taylor Amber Mason (played by Asia Kate Dillon) in *Billions*. In Emily Nussbaum's great article on *Billions* in the *New Yorker*, she worried that in this representation of the universe of high-stakes banking, even though it seems obvious that everyone is implicated in corrupt practices, Taylor, because they are gender non-binary, they figure as the good guy to the boss, Axe's bad guy. As his name suggests, Axe is the bad version of a capitalism out for money at all cost and Taylor is supposed to represent a human face or some kind of ethical commitment. If Taylor is supposed to represent a more ethical kind of banking, which is dubious, Nussbaum worries that this then sets up the gender non-binary person to be an impossibly moral person.



Billboard of Dick.



"Ho, Dick, I want to be an intellectual like you." — Chris



Transparent: Maura will not be able to live in a body of her choosing. There is no surgical magic bullet available

But what this argument obscures is that in either case whether we're talking about Taylor, Taylor's Banking Company or Axe's, we're still talking about exploitive predatory practices that have absolutely nothing to do with social justice. This is one of those sleights of hands that Hollywood or mainstream TV often engages in. The pure fact of representing someone who is alternative, is seen as progressive.

JR: That would you say is Soloway's take on this? How do *Transparent* or *I love Dick* differ from this?

JH: Do you mean, how does a queer and trans produced show deal with the positive/negative character breakdown? Is there a different moral structure to the universe of *Transparent*? I think the answer is yes and no. And you mentioned both *Transparent* and *I love Dick* but I think they are really different examples.

I personally hated *I love Dick* and thought that it was a bit embarrassing for a number of different reasons. The most obvious reason is that the book *I love Dick* by Chris Kraus is an epistolary novel. It's a book about letters that the obsessed author writes to the object of her crush: Dick. And I think in a way Soloway didn't reckon with the form of the novel and the dynamism that the novel draws from this form. The book is a fantastic read, sexy and obsessive, deeply literary and interested in narrative as seduction. But the adaptation to TV reduced everything to a series of sort of cringe-worthy sex scenes and made the Dick character totally unremarkable as an object of desire. Kathryn Hahn and Kevin Bacon are amazing actors, so it is too bad that they lost in this mess of a series.

Transparent I think offers a much more complicated viewing experience because it does cover a lot of ground that an urban queer or trans viewer might find fairly urgent, fairly authentic. It deals with storylines that actually we're quite interested in. Also, there are no impossibly good characters and bad characters. And it's such a relief therefore to be in a TV world where people do bad things for bad reasons sometimes and good things for good reasons. Maura is a finely drawn character who learns over time and who fucks up and disappoints people and conveys a subtle balance of narcissism and care. The show went completely to hell in the last season, when they all went to Israel, so I am not really talking about that but in the penultimate season, season 3, Maura has to confront something that many trans people have to face but that is almost never represented in mainstream material on transgender experience. In a poignant scene in a doctor's office, a scene that is so much a part of trans life due to the surgeries and hormone treatments that transgender people want, a doctor tells her why he cannot perform Sex Reassignment Surgery on her due to a heart problem. Maura, for whom this surgery obviously figures centrally in her transition, now has to confront the fact that she will not be able to live in a body of her choosing. This experience, not being able to access surgery or to take hormones, is central to many transgender people's journeys and so, confronting the fact that there is no surgical magic bullet available is a really believable and interesting place for the show to land. It refuses the arc of transition in some way and leaves us in the messy middle.

Now the visual medium in particular has a hard time with the messy middle because there is a kind of double investment in passing—first, in order to represent a conventionally attractive male or female subject and second to invest in the otherwise unacknowledged visual pleasure that so much visual cultures derive from gender normativity on screen. In a nutshell, if a character does not pass, then every shot is about this failure. But if the character can pass, then there's a tendency as the narrative goes on to absorb the transness of the character back into the visual template of normativity. So, the visual medium is in so many ways a very difficult medium for the representation of all kinds of trans

experiences. The indeterminacy of many trans people basically means that they cannot appear or disappear in the context of our visual regime. So, I happen to think that that *Transparent* made a real contribution to televisual complexity by representing trans ambiguation.



Maura is neither completely mean nor completely nice, it feels good. She conveys a subtle balance of narcissism and care.



- Maura: "Elizah, maybe you've seen her on the streets?"
- Pedestrians: "Que, qué?"
- "What street? I'm a student. These two are getting their nursing licenses. Exactly. What street?"

And in that same season, the series offers a nice set of references about how privileged she is. This is important because up until then, the series has sort of presented Maura as struggling—struggling with her family and struggling with her identity and struggling with her embodiment. There's a switch in season three that allows the show to blossom and take the character to new heights precisely by representing her in a negative light. Maura, in episode one of season three, is volunteering at the LGBT suicide hotline. She speaks to a desperate trans teen and botches the conversation. The teen, Elizah, hangs up so Maura speeds off into South Central Los Angeles in search of the teen and quickly finds herself in trouble. In interactions with a Black shop owner and some Latinas shopping nearby, Maura reveals herself to be someone who always imagines herself as central in the world—she is going to save someone and is full of self-importance. But she is the one who needs saving in the end and when she faints in the heat, lost and frustrated, she looks around bewildered and asks plaintively: "What's wrong with me?" The answer here is not—you are trans, but rather, you are wealthy, sheltered, blind and completely cut off from the realities most people face.

I thought the episode was a very effective way of reminding us that a show about trans people isn't simply going to be a show about people who need help or people who are helping. The whole mechanism of helping gets pushed out of the way and we access the messy business of living.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



"MAN ON THE LAND! MAN ON THE LAND!"
"This is bullshit." — Maura

Another sequence in *Transparent* of similar power follows Maura and her two daughters to the annual Michigan Women's Music Festival. The daughters, like Maura, have complex relations to the categories of lesbian and woman. Michigan Women's Music Festival is one of the most polarizing sites for the conflict that has emerged between trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFS) and transfeminists. Soloway used the episode to allow various characters to unfold positions within the debate about Michigan's trans-exclusive/women-only policies. And having aired this range of opinions, the show is still brave enough to show that simply representing all sides of a debate, in true liberal fashion, does not change the hard realities of the situation. In the end Maura, as a trans woman, feels completely unwelcome and she is forced to leave off the land. She's furious, she's disappointed, she feels wretched. She feels as if the place that she went to find community is just yet another place where she finds that she does not belong.



"Vicki, I don't know what to do." "You want to see me?" "Yes."

But what's brilliant then, about the next sequences, is that Maura is picked up by Angelica Houston's character—a straight woman who wanted to be at Michigan but found herself alienated in all kinds of ways, as maybe a straight woman who's going to be accused of sleeping with the enemy or whatever. And weirdly, the two character's sexual predilections and their bodily morphologies work because Maura is a pre-op trans woman and Angelica Houston's character is an alternative straight woman; therefore, their bodies sort of match and we even witness an incredible, albeit uncomfortable, sex scene. That's definitely a one-of-a-kind moment on television or even in cinema because it proposes that sex is prismatic, kaleidoscopic, it thrives on weird geometries rather than mutuality and complementarity.

More importantly, it reminds us that for people who do feel deeply alienated often by their trans embodiment and their sense that they have fallen out of multiple social orders, sometimes sex can be a way that trans bodies are pulled back pleasurably into relation. And I think it was quite a subtle way of resolving the tension which is lingering at this point between feminists who see trans women and men as traitors, and trans men and women who understand themselves as feminists.

JR: It's very interesting because it brings up the complexity of sexuality, gender and sex. It's not binary and nothing is binary.



Capitalism has found it in *Billions*. Taylor won the Alpha Cup Charity Poker Tournament.

JH: It's not binary; once you're in the world of trans, you're out of the world of the binary. That's so however much some trans men and women may just want to go stealth and represent themselves as normative men and women, which is their absolute right to do. But the minute that you're in the realm of the reorganization of the recognizable normative body, you are out of the realm of the binary. And I think that's in fact what has led the way to our current preoccupation with the non-binary. That's why we have a character like Taylor on *Billions*. It's precisely because capitalism is sort of relentless in relationship to these new bodily forms.

Capitalism can be relentless in its desire to monopolize new social forms. It's just a matter of time before every sitcom has a non-binary character. So, we have to also be careful not to imagine—and this goes back to our conversation about *Billions*—that the appearance of a non-binary body here, a trans body there, a queer relationship somewhere else, signals new worlds of possibility. It might just indicate that capitalism has found its next market.

JR: Would that bring us to *Tangerine*?



Tangerine: Alex and Ramzik on Christmas Eve.

JH: Now that would take us to *Tangerine*, a remarkable film that could easily fall into at least an expanded understanding of TV in the sense that it was shot on an iPhone and was literally made on a small screen. But that fact alone wouldn't be enough to make it into an interesting example of queer or trans TV. Its effectiveness depends upon the way in which the director, Sean Baker, and the two actors, Kitana Kiki Rodriguez (Sin-Dee) and Mya Taylor (Alexandra) turn the smallness of the screen into a part of the narrative. The narrative itself is small, local and specific, local to the point of highlighting not Hollywood per se but just a corner in Hollywood. We meet Sin-Dee and Alexandra in not "Hollywood," the movie industry, but Hollywood, the neighborhood. This is a beautiful riff about what Hollywood is, because we have this sort of heterotopic understanding of Hollywood as a non-place of cultural production, of hegemonic cultural production. In reality, the actual geographic area known as Hollywood is a fairly down-at-heel part of Midtown LA populated by homeless people, sex workers and donut shops. That is the world that we're introduced to in *Tangerine*.



Corners meetings.

You can critique the film for representing trans women of color only in relation to

sex work, but there is a harsh reality there about the ways in which trans women of color can and cannot access the possibility of making a living in a labor market that has no place for such bodies. However, you can also redeem the film in the sense that it doesn't give us one sex worker and it doesn't represent her as tragic. It gives us two and their friends, and they're actually in this anarchic, rollicking, fantastic zone of play.



"Do them just as dirty as they do us."

In terms of the representation of trans bodies, it's quite significant that in *Tangerine*, there are two women. For much of the history of representing trans bodies, cinema in particular has been content to offer you one trans body. And for the most part that trans body has been represented as mad, bad, and dangerous. You only have to think of *Dressed to Kill* from 1980 by Brian De Palma where Michael Caine plays a serial killer by night who is a frustrated transsexual and a psychoanalyst by day. Or *Silence of the Lambs* where the serial killer who plays opposite the cerebral, more desirable killer of Hannibal Lecter, is a certifiable psychopath who's also transsexual and kidnaps women because he wants to starve them and flay them and wear their skin. In the past, the only transsexuals that we saw on screen were depicted as pathological because their condition was impossible, and because it was impossible, they enacted a kind of violent will upon the world.



Dressed to Kill and *Silence of the Lambs* have that kind of mad, bad, and dangerous transsexual psychopath.

So the contemporary moment is interesting for the way in which we have completely stepped away from that entire realm of representation. And we have a lot of queer TV peopled with so-called normal LGT characters. *Tangerine*, however, resisted the lure of the normal and instead offered two, memorable characters who fight, take drugs, take a white woman hostage, confront errant boyfriends and, most importantly, love each other.



The wig offering in *Tangerine*.

JR: You know, that's the big question.... How does queer theory enable us to better understand multiple situations where the television narrative produces or does not produce a questioning of the hegemonic representation? Like how can we use queer theory to do exactly this: question and not abide by this normative or reproduction of homonormative or heteronormative storyline?

JH: Well, honestly queer theory has been engaged with the question of the popular from its inception. The late Alexander Doty's early work was about the popular. Patricia White, fantastic film theorist, has dissected beautifully Hollywood cinema. One of her great essays is about the way in which queer characters appear throughout Hollywood cinema, even in the production code era, and there are a number of different coded ways in which they appear. The most obvious example would be that the lesbian often appears in the supporting role, as Mrs. Danvers to Rebecca or in some of the roles played by Mercedes McCambridge characters for example. There are lots and lots of queer theoretical



Engaging with hegemonic in a pleasant way and also dissecting it.

books and essays that have thoroughly dissected the popular. Except for in its earliest form, when queer theory was preoccupied with hegemonic literature in English and American traditions that was both canonical and queer, like Walt Whitman, E. M. Forster, Oscar Wilde and so on—apart from that very short era, most of what we would call queer theory has offered theoretical models with which to engage with the hegemonic in pleasurable ways, but also to dissect them.

I mean, I've written at length about the popular mostly through the category of either children's literature or queer animation to make the point that some of the most easily consumable mass-market material like Pixar animations, for example, or the early CGI animations, are just saturated with queer material precisely because they have to appeal to the antic sensibility of children. And children, whatever they may be and whatever they may become, they're not born into the world as heterosexual. And therefore, those realms are just teeming with queer characters—whether it's a drag queen in the third version of *Shrek* or whether it's the really important relationship between like Dory and Nemo or whether it's the queerness of Dory herself, voiced by the very openly queer Ellen DeGeneres and so on.

A lot of queer theory has not subscribed to the kind of Adorno critique of the culture industry as always and only a force of hyper-capitalized seduction that basically smooths over political unrest with this kind of soporific, palliative, endless production of films and TV shows that reduce us to couch potatoes and stop us from rising up. Right? And there's still so much to say about the concept of the culture industry, especially because however embedded we were in the cultural industry when Adorno and Horkheimer were thinking about it, we are beyond saturated now. It would be very difficult to figure out who we are separate from our multiple implications in many forms of media on a daily basis. So, we do need a kind of updated version of the culture industry, but I think it would be wrong to simply cast the popular as in some way the realm of the degraded, the debased, and the co-opted and then to represent the avant-garde as a place of refuge.

And at this point, we can no longer distinguish between the refuge of the avant-garde and the seduction of the mass market. There are no longer clear distinctions between high and low. So that's a world in which TV can thrive, you see. Because when TV was low to cinema's high, there was a distribution of a kind of visual affect. Where the distinction between high and low has collapsed, as we've said all along in this conversation, you're going to get both complete and utter media dominance but you will also find that the very media that you're soaking in also contains within it lots of exit routes.

JR: That's so interesting. I guess we would be at the takeaway, or is there anything else you wanted to talk about that we didn't address?

JH: You know, I think we've mostly talked about what has been called a kind of "Prestige TV", even as it's recognized as fairly trashy. *Billions* and *Transparent* and a lot of the series within which we do find very reasonable representations of queer and trans people are Prestige TV. It's important to also look at the other forms of TV like *Queer Eye*. It was interesting to me that *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* made a comeback in the last two years, having been a kind of blip on the radar some ten years ago and having been a sensation at the very beginning of the arc that we're now on the other side of, where TV began its climb back up into a competing platform within the visual regime that we inhabit. *Queer Eye*



Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, 2003.



16 years later... Queer Eye: "We're in Japan"

amazingly has been remade for this era but while its original interventions were quite disruptive because they usually staged interventions into white, cis-normative masculinity, they are now merely opportunities for market dynamics—ways of selling products and brands. We get improvement cloaked as liberation, marketability cloaked as taste, new bodily regimes cloaked as hygiene.

That's what all of these HGTV shows are about as well. These new, “fix up your home,” “change your furniture” shows, when what we're really looking at is just the spectacle of real estate and consumption and the market, so when we watch those shows and when we watch *Queer Eye*, we're watching the very obvious emergence of a queer market (one I might add that has been there all along).

I think it's very important to remember that, even as we have four or five seasons of *Transparent* revolving around a trans character, we also have to recognize that queer and trans TV is in the business of making new markets on the one hand, catering to those markets on the other, and contributing to new televisual regimes within which it's not simply that the medium is the message: the medium is the market. In many ways, as *Queer Eye* shows, some versions of gayness are like Pied Piper figures leading everyone into the shopping mall.

And to go back to your point about queer theory, queer and trans theory without lapsing into a kind of Adorno elite critique of the false consciousness of the masses, we do have to be clear about the massive wave of production of homo and trans normativities and think carefully about what that might mean in the future.

Acknowledgment: Visual assemblage by Map.



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The Sense8 cluster all together. Standing L-R: Wolfgang (Max Riemelt) and Will (Brian J. Smith); Sitting L-R: Capheus (Toby Onwumere), Nomi (Jamie Clayton), Sun (Bae Doona), Riley (Tuppence Middleton), Lito (Miguel Ángel Silvestre); front: Kala (Tina Desai).



Sun is in prison having taken responsibility for her brother's fraudulent financial dealings. Her brother, Joong-Ki (Ki-Chan Lee) lies and tells her that shame killed their father, when in fact it was Joong-Ki who had him killed.



Wolfgang reluctantly performs a karaoke version of 'What's Up?' by 4 Non Blondes (Linda Perry 1992).

Sense8 and sensibility, or how it became necessary to queer the world in order to save it

by [Deborah Shaw](#) and [Rob Stone](#)

Making sense of *Sense8* requires a certain sensibility.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] Dreamt up by Lana and Lilly Wachowski and J. Michael Straczynski for Netflix, *Sense8* dropped onto the global streaming platform on 5 June 2015. The first episode introduced a multinational ensemble cast playing eight strangers from different parts of the world. And, as viewers discovered that these characters shared mental, physical and emotional experiences that amounted to radical empathy, so the viewers claimed to share the characters' radical empathy too, not only via their viewing of the series but through an online fanbase that would grow to determine the fate of the series. Ostensibly the show was a science-fiction series, relating how eight "sensates" realize they are a separate species named Homo Sensorium; the disparate group can communicate telepathically, body-swap in times of need, and transcend time and space to form a resistant, even militant unit that fights for survival against a sinister organization. Although in its effect *Sense8* quickly transcended its synopsis, we provide a brief outline here, especially useful for readers who have not seen the series.

The characters: "You are no longer just you"

To give a sense of the series without detailing the widely varying episode incidents, we will briefly describe the characters. There is an onscreen cluster of eight members of a separate species termed Homo Sensorium who share a birth date of 8 August (the eighth month). The episode plotlines generally serve to show the ways that radical empathy sets these characters apart from stalled human evolution (the figure 8 also is the symbol of infinity). Many of the plotlines revolve around action adventures, but there is a difference from most action plots: these characters share an empathetic psychic connection, can hear and converse with each other, and can appear in each other's lives when the occasion demands.

After they find they can 'visit' fellow members of their cluster, they progress to 'sharing' and become an eight-strong 'being'. As Jonas explains the process to Will, this sharing can only occur with his "seven other selves" within the cluster; and sharing allows them all to (in Jonas's words) access "each other's knowledge, language, skills." At times of greatest emotional and physical intensity, all the sensates appear together, which turns sex into an orgy, for example, and a fight into a full-on brawl, Lito's coming out speech at São Paulo's Pride into a collective celebration of self-affirmation, and a classical music concert in Iceland into the occasion of group therapy, with each sensate reliving memories of his/her/their birth.



Kala tells her husband Rajan (Purab Kohli) that it is her body and she will know when she is ready to make love with him.



Will inhabits Nomi's body so that he can use his detective skills to unlock the handcuffs and help her escape from the hospital and prevent her from being lobotomized by BPO.



Riley and Will, her cluster-mate and love, listen to all the different music that their clustermates are listening to around the world.

One of the sensates Bak Sun (Bae Doona) is a businesswoman from Seoul with extraordinary fighting skills. She finds herself embroiled in her family's corruption, then takes the fall, is incarcerated and breaks out in search of revenge. Neglected and overlooked by her father after her mother's early death and burdened with looking out for her selfish brother, Sun expresses her frustrations via martial arts. She becomes a star of underground kickboxing, a male-dominated milieu (as indicated by the title of S01:E03, 'Smart Money's on the Skinny Bitch').

Another action character is Wolfgang Bogdanow (Max Riemelt), a streetwise Berliner, expert fighter and safe cracker, born into a gangster dynasty and pushed into gangland culture. The progeny of his abusive father's rape of his sister, Wolfgang kills his father when just a boy and still resents his cousin and kingpin uncle, who did nothing to protect him or his sister/mother from his father.

Wolfgang enjoys a reciprocated passion for his Mumbai-based cluster-mate Kala Dandekar (Tina Desai). Kala is a highly competent chemist who struggles to reconcile her faith with science, professional duties with moral imperatives, and a chaste affection for her husband with an undeniable passion for Wolfgang. As an action heroine, she has no compunction about killing, and as a chemist, she provides the cluster with chemical blockers to prevent their mortal enemy Whispers from 'visiting' the cluster.

The cluster is also joined by Will Gorski (Brian J. Smith), a Chicago cop with fighting prowess, heightened detective skills, and a strict moral code. Although seemingly a privileged white male cop, Will has been stigmatized by his psychic gifts ever since he was a child, when he was first 'visited' by Sara Patrell, a young girl murdered by Whispers. That experience damaged Will's relationship with his ex-cop father (Joe Pantoliano), whose belief in his son's psychic gifts was ridiculed by police colleagues.

Will is in love with fellow sensate Riley Gunnarsdóttir (Tuppence Middleton), an internationally renowned DJ from Reykjavik with a tragic past. Riley experienced the death of her husband and new-born baby in a car crash; grief-ridden, she left Iceland for London and plunged into the solace of its drug-ridden rave scene. Her increasingly maternal role and musical talents bind the cluster together, attract other sensates, and help maintain their well-being throughout the series' varied adventures.

Then there is Capheus Onyango (played by Aml Ameen in S01 and Toby Onwumere in S02), a Nairobi *matatu* (pimped-up bus) driver turned political activist. He is known affectionately to locals as Van Damme for his love of the Belgian action star. His gifts are courage, driving skills, and honesty in the face of criminal violence. He even becomes an anti-corruption political candidate. Capheus is struggling to raise money to pay for his mother's AIDS medication, but his inter-tribal heritage renders him an outsider and his moral integrity sets him in conflict with local small-time and big-shot gangsters.

In terms of characters who are trans or gay/lesbian, San Francisco-based Nomi Marks (Jamie Clayton) is a transgender woman and computer hacktivist, a dispenser of wry wisdom. She is on the FBI's most-wanted list until she commits e-death and erases her life completely from all existing data. At one point, Nomi's mother sanctions the sinister organization, BPO as it attempts to lobotomize her daughter in a perverse attempt to reverse Nomi's previous gender reassignment surgery.

And finally, there is Lito Rodríguez (Miguel Ángel Silvestre), an initially closeted gay B-movie actor from Mexico City, who frequently shares his acting skills with his cluster members to get them out of danger. Lito keeps his true self secret from



Capheus realizes that the defective AIDS medication Rajan's company sells to 'Africa' has a direct effect on his sick mother and their community in Kenya.

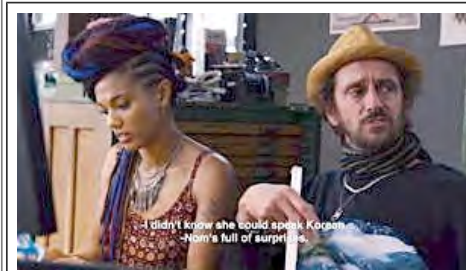


Nomi is about to perform her hacktivist work for the cluster, but not before she has her coffee!

his loving mother and his fans. He is socially ostracized when a vengeful attempt at blackmail results in his exposure and enforced coming out. But, thanks to his cathartic speech at São Paulo Pride he becomes an internationally famous gay icon and secures a breakthrough Hollywood role.

Secondary human characters inhabit a kind of hierarchy topped by those who are gradually let in on the secrets of the cluster:

- Nomi's partner Amanita Caplan (Freema Agyeman) and hacktivist buddy Bug (Michael X Sommers).
- Will's cop partner Diego Morales (Ness Bautista) and, in the final episode, Wolfgang's best friend Felix (Max Mauff).
- Sun's pursuer in romantic and law enforcement terms, Detective Mun (Sukku Son).
- Kala's husband Rajan (Purab Kohli).
- Lito's partner Hernando (Alfonso Herrera) and their companion Daniela (Eréndira Ibarra).
- Capheus's pansexual journalist girlfriend Zakia (Mumbi Maina) and his friend and business partner Jela (Paul Ogola).



Amanita and Bug watch as Nomi inhabited by Sun watches a Korean video of her brother being interviewed on television.



Hernando and Daniela paint Lito's toenails.



Lito defends his right to a private life.

The plot also features other sensates in flashbacks. In particular, one flashback features the birth of the cluster as experienced by Angelica Turing (Daryl Hannah). Interestingly, her name suggests a homage to Alan Turing's advances in computing and it connects the sensates with his history of queer persecution, while also suggesting a correlation between sensate powers and the connectivity of computers and cyberspace.

That people who have never met and who live very distinct lives in very different parts of the world should discover themselves via empathy to be members of an exclusive cluster was also a perfect concept for the Netflix audience to recognize as their bonding experience of viewing *Sense8*. An underlying social condition shaped the use of the sci-fi genre and affected much of the audience's devotion. That is, the Wachowskis recognized that in our corrupt and threatened world they needed a science fiction premise to demonstrate the ways in which empathy was a rare quality, perhaps equivalent to super strength or invisibility, and therefore a quality found only in superheroes. Such a series' premise then implied that each viewer could become a superhero by simply expressing empathy. No wonder that the fanbase's glimpses of utopian fulfilment, when snatched away by the series' cancellation, resulted in such a passionate fan response that it led to the granting of a series finale. That finale then was full of utopian resolutions replete with

interpretative understandings of the concept, theory and practice of trans*. In addition, it offered ideas of being and becoming that are interrogated via queer subjectivity. As a result, this final episode was less of a conclusion, than a prologue to what those same gender-savvy fans might hope to realize in life.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The cluster celebrate their shared birthday on August 8th.

The series fan culture

Proud and loud, delirious with the possibilities of pushing aside television tropes, limitations and restrictions, *Sense8* was astonishingly queer and primed to party with big themes of religion, politics, identity, gender and sexuality as well as to contend with many social problems. The series' through-line was utopian in outlook though set in a recognizably dystopian world. *Sense8* used its science fiction premise to explore new forms of being and becoming that referred to and enacted social, philosophical, virtual, queer and trans potentialities.

In some ways, partially due to commercial decisions, the series had critical success but limited viewership. For example, Netflix did not promote *Sense8* through traditional means but via algorithm-driven targeting to existing subscribers. However, its sci-fi premise deterred some of its queer viewers, while its queerness deterred some sci-fi audiences. Yet, *Sense8* also garnered a devoted audience and praise for bending genre and gender, along with Emmy nominations for its music in 2016 and its cinematography in 2017. It also won the 2016 GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Drama Series in recognition of its representation of LGBTQ characters and themes.

Although never a mainstream hit that might have justified its production costs and ensured more than two ill-fitting seasons, *Sense8* transcended ordinary televisual impact and united, inspired and energized a global audience. Fans of all series, including *Sense8*, have developed new viewing practices such as the single-sit series, whereby all episodes are consumed in one go, the repetitive binge-watch, which repeats this immersive spectatorship, and simultaneous communal tweeting and watch parties, whereby an audience collects on social media to comment alongside an episode. Indeed, these communal practices gave rise to new, audience-led forms of auteurism, whereby the fanbase developed its own agency to the point where it could successfully campaign for a continuation or new ending to its cherished series.

As Amanda D. Lotz has noted, "Netflix's primary goal is to expand the number of people who subscribe to its service and maintain those that already do so" (2021). Indeed, the global online distribution enabled by Netflix is an ideal fit for many of the series' plotlines of transnational reach and connections, both tentative and invasive. In terms of visual style, as the eight sensates appear in each other's lives when called upon, regardless of their actual location, they also appear simultaneously on our screens. Thus, whether viewers are watching in any of the series' principal locations—Chicago, San Francisco, London, Reykjavik, Berlin, Mumbai, Nairobi, Seoul, Mexico City or Amsterdam—or in any other regions where the series is available, *Sense8* creates a visual international locus for fans who subscribed not just to Netflix but to this series' inclusivity and passion as well. So when the news broke in June 2017 that Netflix had cancelled the series on a cliffhanger ending, these same fans raged and grieved and mobilized online, creating a wave of million-signature petitions and imaginative campaigns directed at Netflix's CEO. As Horak and Samer note, many of the fans participating in a Sense8 Change.org petition, are queer, trans, and/or of color, and for these fans

"the cancelation of the series was accompanied by feelings of loss, not solely for the series as a text itself but for global queer kinship found and felt through its fandom" (2021).

Horak and Samer describe the ways that “a global fandom took on a global company” (2021), through the petitions and such rallying activities as the flip-flop campaign in which fans sent flip-flops to Netflix offices around the world, which may seem random but was an insider fan joke that referenced a scene in which a drunk Lito’s pain at separating from his boyfriend Hernando is encapsulated by the fact that he needs him to help him find his missing flip-flop. In an unprecedented move, this collective action by a fanbase caused the network to re-think the series cancellation. Consequently, it commissioned a feature-length concluding episode for the series, the aptly titled ‘Amor Vincit Omnia’.

This fan-inspired resurrection of *Sense8* prompted show-runner Lana Wachowski to release a personal letter about it. Here she celebrated the collaborative input of the fans, whom she described as ‘unlike any I have ever encountered as an artist’:

“By myself, there was nothing I could do. But just as the characters in our show discover that they are not alone, I too have learned that I am not just a me. I am also a we. [...] In this world it is easy to believe that you cannot make a difference; that when a government or an institution or corporation makes a decision, there is something irrevocable about the decision; that love is always less important than the bottom line. But here is a gift from the fans of this show that I will carry forever in my heart: while it is often true those decisions are irreversible, it is not always true. Improbably, unforeseeably, your love has brought *Sense8* back to life. (I could kiss every single one of you!).” (Miller 2017)

Seen and thanked by the creator of the series they adored, the fans realized their ability to transcend television industry norms by the same radical empathy and self-realization explored in the series itself.

A trans* perspective: “Just turn the wheel and the future changes”

The science-fiction conceit that the Wachowski sisters explore in *Sense8* allows for a great deal of playful, psycho-sexual drama. What matters is that the series’ makers are enjoying sci-fi’s evident freedom to explore the fantastical ruse of eight distant strangers sharing their minds, bodies, feelings, skills and locations. In fact, Lilly Wachowski has specifically made reference to José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of a queer utopia, which he develops in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Muñoz’s potential queer utopianism provided Lilly Wachowski with optimism during her process of coming out as transgender, especially when she faced an imminent, typically antagonistic exposé by the UK’s *Daily Mail*. Rising far above that tabloid’s hostility, she commented on what queer potentiality meant for her on a very personal level:

“Gender theory and queer theory hurt my tiny brain. The combinations of words, like freeform jazz, clang disjointed and discordant in my ears. I long for understanding of queer and gender theory but it’s a struggle as is the struggle for understanding of my own identity. I have a quote in my office though by José Muñoz given to me by a good friend. I stare at it in contemplation sometimes trying to decipher its meaning, but the last sentence resonates: ‘Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world.’ So I will continue to be an optimist adding my shoulder to the Sisyphean struggle of progress and in my very being, be an example of the potentiality of another world.” (Baim 2016)

Muñoz's queer utopia includes complex notions of inclusive potentiality and strategic modes of becoming that duly resonate throughout *Sense8*. Following Muñoz, Jack Halberstam and Cáel M Keegan have argued for their use of an asterisk to speak of trans*. They see it as a theoretical mode, a way into conceptualizing trans* identities as an open non-category that points towards forms of becoming in opposition to thinking in terms of fixed, enclosed minds and bodies. Halberstam writes,

“the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity.” (2018: 4)

The potentiality of trans* philosophy thus lies in its disruption of any clear-cut male/female binary:

“We could say the term ‘trans*’ marks a politics based on a general instability of identity and oriented toward social transformation, not political accommodation.” (Halberstam 2018: 50)

This rejection of the binary was shared by the show's writers. In her coming out speech, given while accepting The Human Rights Campaign's Visibility Award, Lana Wachowski questions thinking about transition as arriving at any fixed place. In terms of media genres, she criticizes a talk show format that fulfils

“the cathartic arc of rejection to acceptance without ever interrogating the pathology of a society that refuses to acknowledge the spectrum of gender in the exact same blind way they have refused to see a spectrum of race or sexuality.” (THR Staff 2012)

This does not mean that the Wachowskis question the validity of their identity or their transitions. Rather, like trans-identified Halberstam and Keegan, they use their lived experiences and their creativity to call into question all traditional gender regimes. Thus, in *Lilly and Lana Wachowski: Sensing Transgender* (2018), Keegan argues for reading the Wachowskis' entire corpus through a trans* lens and contends that their public coming out requires new critical readings of their films (2018: 5). This would include the third sequel to *The Matrix* (due 2021) which boasts a reunion of sorts for fans of *Sense8* with its cast including Max Riemelt, Toby Onwumere, Brian J. Smith and Eréndira Ibarra. Keegan cites Lilly Wachowski in this regard as recognizing,

“there's a critical eye being cast back on Lana's and my work through the lens of our transness, and this is a cool thing, because it's an excellent reminder that art is never static.” (Keegan 2018: 5).

Thanks in no small part to the Wachowskis, recent trans* advances in film and television have been without precedent as critics have demonstrated (Halberstam 2018; Henry 2019; Steinbock 2019), and as has been so well illustrated by the Netflix documentary *Disclosure* (Feder 2020) on the history of trans representation on screen as discussed by trans actors, producers, directors, including *Sense8*'s Jamie Clayton and Lilly Wachowski. Muñoz, meanwhile, has argued that artistic practice offers unique spaces to create the forms of utopian queer that he advances in his writing:

“often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity.” (Muñoz 2009: 1).

Informing *Sense8* is Muñoz's vision of a utopian artistic queer potentiality and



Nomi and Amanita dance at their wedding.



Lito and Hernando make tender love.



Kala and Rajan at their traditional wedding celebrations.



A traumatized Riley in London.



Kala instigates a threesome with Wolfgang and

Halberstam's understanding of trans* as a reaching beyond societal frameworks towards new ways of being. Enter Homo Sensorium, *Sense8*'s separate species of human, whom through science fiction finds an artistic medium in which theoretical utopian potentialities can be realized.

Keegan finds "faith in the subjunctive quality of art to lead us elsewhere" (2018: 2) in the work of the Wachowskis. Such an idea, along with much of the philosophy of *Sense8*, is echoed by Siri Hustvedt (2017) in *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind*. Hustvedt has mirror touch synesthesia, which resembles the condition and powers of a sensate:

"research has shown that mirror touch synesthetes are more vulnerable to blurred self-other boundaries, identity shifts and feel more empathy for other people." (2017: 378)

In a chapter entitled 'Becoming Others' (2017: 367-381), Hustvedt discusses the ways that authors and readers cross borders through writing and reading, entering into a 'transitional space' and inhabiting other selves (2017: 376). This describes the cluster in *Sense8* but it is also the space around *Sense8*, too, where audiences enter into a relationship with art, with trans* characterizing this journey to other realities via empathy. But *Sense8* is not an exclusively queer or trans series as can be seen in the overview presented above of the characters. Its manifesto is trans, and its practice is queer, but its outcome is polyamorous. For example, the first episode presents Nomi in a romantic and fulfilling lesbian relation with Amanita and Lito in a similarly successful (albeit closeted) gay relationship with Hernando, yet prior to their birth as a cluster the other characters are not ostensibly queer and have lives unfulfilled by queer potentiality.

Comparatively, at the start of the series, the heteronormative sensates are all stalled or inhibited: Kala is a virgin bride, Capheus appears to be non-sexual, Riley is traumatized by the death of her child and inhabits an uncaring, self-serving group made of small-time criminals. Will is single and so stigmatized by the harm his psychic gifts have caused his ex-cop father that he treats any potential moral indiscretion as a Freudian abhorrence. And Sun, it is suggested, has only ever had sex once, with a combat rival who would grow up to be the detective who pursues her.

By the end of season two, however, Capheus is in love with the pansexual Zakia, and Sun is enjoying sex with Detective Mun, who shares her liking for combat as foreplay. Will is reborn by the attentions of Riley, and Lito is beginning to enjoy the sexual attentions of a woman, Daniela, in addition to those of his life partner Hernando, while Kala instigates her own thrilling threesome with her husband and Wolfgang. The only thing missing from all these representations of sex and sexuality is any notion of exclusivity, hierarchy or limitations—and all enjoy cluster orgies.

In contrast, the villains in *Sense8* are those without empathy, unwilling to cross identity borders, and consequently obsessed with imposing heteronormativity. Whispers is a straight, white male, a husband and father whose anti-sensate campaign speaks of repression and self-loathing as he too is a sensate. He operates beneath a guise of science, as he dedicates himself to an extreme kind of conversion therapy, lobotomizing sensates when he captures them, erasing any divergent thoughts, and gaining complete control of their minds.



Other antagonists are similarly straight, fearful and predatory. They include Joaquín Flores (Raúl Méndez), Daniela's possessive ex-boyfriend, a brutish

her husband, Rajan.

macho playboy who vengefully exposes Lito's homosexuality. They also include Sun's weak but murderous younger brother, Bak Joong-Ki (Ki-Chan Lee), another corrupt playboy, who shores up his masculinity at high-class brothels.

| | |
|--|---|
|  |  |
| Joaquín, Daniela's abusive ex-boyfriend, tries to persuade Dani to return to him | Sun interrupts her brother Bak Joong-Ki at a high-class brothel to attempt to save the family business. |

Parents are particularly demonized in this regard. Wolfgang's father, whose crime in addition to his toxic masculinity, is that he has raped his own daughter, rails against his son's sister/mother to "stop teaching my son to sing like a queer!" Daniela's parents are so shocked at their daughter's live-in and loving relationship with Lito and Hernando that they demand she return to live with them and effectively 'reboot' her heteronormativity. And Nomi's mother seeks to 'correct' the corrective surgery her daughter has already undergone by facilitating the lobotomy that will also erase Nomi and reinstate her image of a son. Heteronormativity is by no means an indication of evil in *Sense8*, but a denial of any alternative certainly is. So, is queering the world a way to save it?

| | |
|---|---|
|  |  |
| Wolfgang's father rails against his son's sister/mother to 'stop teaching my son to sing like a queer!' | Daniela returns from Pride with Hernando and Lito and is confronted by her parents' disapproval at her relationship with the two men. |

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Utopian queer world-building: “Amor vincit omnia”



Lito's heartfelt and cathartic coming out speech is met with cheering.

One plotline in season two, for example, deals with one character's coming out. Shunned by Mexico's domestic film industry, shown as unable to accommodate a gay action hero, Lito is invited to be guest of honor at São Paulo's LGBT Pride event. There, his heartfelt coming out speech—"I am a gay man. I am a GAY man. I AM A GAY MAN"—inspires extended scenes of revelry that invite participation irrespective of sexual and gender identities. The recording of Lito's speech goes viral and inspires millions, which helps him secure his next role playing a gay character in a prestigious project for a Hollywood director and thereby break into a film industry beyond Mexican borders. The message is clear: communities and, in particular, queer collective events such as Pride and progressive online groups can and do play their part in ending discriminatory practices, within and beyond the film and television industry. Joyful and cathartic, the plot development also inspired the Wachowskis to engage with and commend the *Sense8* audience. That is, they included fan support for Lito as important to the storyline, and extra-diegetically they added a final dedication: 'For Our Fans.' [2] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)



Lito as Grand Marshal comes out and appears on multiple screens at São Paulo's LGBT Pride event.



Lito kisses his partner Hernando (Alfonso Herrera) at São Paulo's LGBT Pride cheered on by the cluster and the crowd.



The sensates gather thereby representing virtual connectivity.

Queering the world might seem like science fiction. But importantly *Sense8* has been released in countries with anti-LGBT policies, such as Russia, Thailand, The United Arab Emirates, Kazakhstan, India and Pakistan. In its storyline, *Sense8* suggests, even assures us, that passion for someone and something cannot be policed. In its form and content, on its particular platform, and in its complementarity with the more progressive communities inhabiting the Internet, *Sense8* also posits a supportive hive-mind as crucial to our evolving collective knowledge.

Sense8 fans became like the sensates in the way they connected across space and time through streaming and social media platforms. For instance, fans on Twitter connected with others and gave rise to such online communities as the Latin America Cluster, the African cluster, the Philippine cluster, the Mexican, American, and Canadian clusters as well as the Global cluster, to give a few examples. We read *Sense8* as a metaphor of the Internet, with its networking, community-building, social interactions, and surveillance, and contend that this adds further context to the online campaign for the series' revival. Seeing the show as a metaphor for the Internet's potential as well as dangers, also illuminates how its characters and concept embody a virtual community that

stands against narrow populism and nationalism and for a new globalism that, as envisioned by *Sense8*, is built on solidarity, empathy and progressive gender and sexual politics. It offers the world a queer invitation to join its party and adds a promise that progressives have more fun.

What is clear about this invitation is that when the Wachowskis apply their trans, queer and science-fiction credentials to a project, there is potential for world-building of the kind that, as Galt and Schoonover describe in relation to *Queer Cinema of the World*,

“promises to knock off kilter conventional epistemologies [via] a process that is active, incomplete, and contestatory and that does not presuppose a settled cartography.” (Galt and Schoonover 2016: 5)

To this end, *Sense8* is:

“a site of political ferment, a volatile public stage on which protest can be expressed and ideas disseminated. It also provides spaces in which to nourish more diffuse experiences of affinity, belonging, and intimacy, where spectatorship provokes the formation of unexpected collisions and coalitions.” (Galt and Schoonover 2016: 21)

This new kind of spectatorship, meanwhile, made self-aware and interactive on the parallel ‘volatile public stage’ of the Internet, sends out signals and establishes an affective response in accordance with Georg Sørensen’s prior definition of a community of sentiment as one offering “a dynamic picture of a contested identity always being debated” (Sørensen 2004: 85). This means that *Sense8* as a series therefore pertains to a “cinema of sentiment”— “defined by awareness, empathy, reflection and acceptance or rejection of elements contributing to or detracting from identity” (Stone, 2018: 271).

The sustained glimpse of a utopia provided by *Sense8*, which offers hope and also nostalgia through re-viewings, resonates amongst its fans all over the world and prompts transnational connections, at least online, in times of national isolationism, sexual conservatism, homophobia and transphobia. In locating this queer utopianism in the polyamory of its cluster, *Sense8*’s vision of collective life demands that we pay attention to its formal construction. *Sense8*’s polyamorous queer world thus responds to José Muñoz’s challenge to artists to create a utopian queer futurity:

“Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as a warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.” (Muñoz 2009: 1)

Indeed, this queer utopia does not (yet) exist but it reveals itself in art, in



Hernando's lecture is interrupted by a student who presents the class with tabloid images showing Hernando and Lito having sex.



Hernando's concludes his deconstruction of the tabloid images of him and Lito having sex by telling his students that 'Art is love made public'.



The clusterfuck buds and grows limbs and bodies at the start of the first Sense8 orgy.



Kala and Rajan.

connectivity and collectivity, in relational modes of being that defy negativity to point towards new modes of becoming. In one of the most celebrated scenes in *Sense8*, Hernando gives voice to this power of queer art to transform minds. In the beginning of season 2, while Hernando is lecturing on art theory, a student projects an image from breaking news of Hernando and Lito having sex, which has been leaked to the traditional press, prompting alerts on social media. In response to the shock and derision of some of his students—"It looks like shit packer porn"—Hernando gives a reading of the photo that rescues the image and reclaims the sex act depicted therein as an act of love and art. Seizing the moment as an opportunity to recognize this image as revealing a queer utopia, he exhorts his students to see

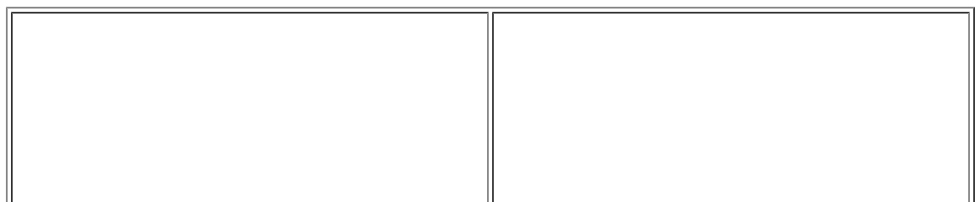
"two vulnerable men caught in an act of pleasure, neither aware of the camera, [. . .] both of them connected to the moment, to each other and to love."

"Art is love made public," he concludes, an idea that connects with Muñoz holding that queer can be harnessed to speak of potential utopian futures:

"The future is a spatial and temporal destination... What we need to know is that queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality. And we must give in to its propulsion, its status as a destination. Willingly we let ourselves feel queerness's pull, knowing it as something else that we can feel, that we must feel." (Muñoz 2009: 185)

Sense8 certainly gives in to and actualizes a spatial and temporal queer pull. In particular, it uses the empathetic connection between the characters to transcend the "here and now" through fiction to reach a "then and there". These utopian connections include the unbounded sexual pleasure in cluster-orgies that transcend the individual and the couple. Through the combination of the two levels of experience, the sensates make quantum love, being both in the here and now with their human and sensate partners in one location, and simultaneously in a then and there with their whole cluster.

Consequently, *Sense8* resolves the queer theory debates that pit LGBTQ marriage and monogamy against more radical identities that resist hegemonic gender and sexual cultural practices (Bersani 2001, Muñoz 2009, Edelman 2004, Halberstam 2018). The sensates can simultaneously be in one place or world and another and they can bring into being the comforts, love and security of monogamy—Kala and Rajan, Nomi and Amanita, Riley and Will, Sun and Mun, Lito and Hernando (with Dani in a throuple, a romantic loving relationship between three people)—while simultaneously embracing the queer polyamorous love and fulfilment of desire made possible in their cluster.





Nomi and Amanita.



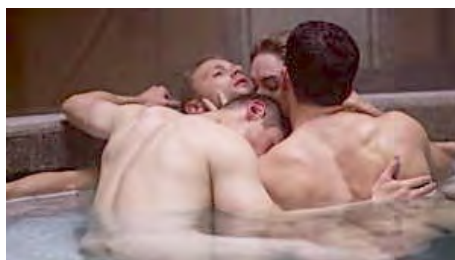
Riley and Will.



Sun and Mun.



Lito, Hernando and Daniela.



Intertwined bodies at the first orgy.



Spectacular and pretty shapes of multiple intimacy at the climax of the first *Sense8* orgy.



The final orgy.



In *Sense8* love is simultaneously centered on the individual, who must work through the transcendentalist stages of self-acceptance towards self-determination, and on the couple and on the collective. Thus, Nomi and Amanita can be introduced in the beginning as enjoying intimate lovemaking *and* can have the most romantic and spectacular of Parisian weddings in the last episode, which enkindles the series' final orgy. That event, too, similarly begins with separate couples but quickly buds bodies and cascades into a glorious revelry full of love and energy.

The sequence is edited to a piece of music called 'Experience' that is actually a mix of two versions, the original, lyrical piece for piano and strings by Ludovico Einaudi and its electronic remix by Starkey. The sequence and its score thereby illustrate how a conventional love between couples (here and now) can expand with imagination to incorporate theoretical possibilities and realize startling innovation (then and there), prompting the series' final punchline from Rajan: 'My God, I did not think such things were possible!'

Unrealized potential: "If all the world's a stage, identity is nothing but a costume"

For a series about utopian potential, *Sense8* is far from perfect. Problems and discrepancies include the Anglo-centrism of its dialogue and songs, some cultural stereotyping and appropriation, and the unequal sexualization of white characters

Rajan 'didn't think such things were possible'.



Whispers, the antagonist of the series, is threatened with violence by Daniela.



Lito in action mode in a role in his latest movie.

(in the first season). Such inequalities and lack of diversity in *Sense8* appear in the early episodes of season 1, with the Asian (Sun), Indian (Kala) and African (Capheus) sensates excused from any sexual activity and given to philosophizing while the white characters (Wolfgang, Riley, Will and Nomi) and the Hispanic (Lito) get theirs. This way of distributing sex scenes among the characters improves in the next season, where all the characters share screen time and value regardless of skin tone, gender, sexuality, or nationality. And everybody has great sex in couples, throuples and the entire group; but juggling at least eight stories means that lapses occur. Scriptwise, *Sense8* has indigestible plot dumps, several bewildering *dei ex machina*, and a lack of focus and balance in the crammed and hurried latter episodes of the second series. Furthermore, the scripts tend to use violence exclusively to overcome obstacles, which leads to an absurd body-count, particularly in the final episode, where it ascends to Bondian levels of carnage.

Perceptive criticisms have also been levelled at *Sense8* by theorists invested in queer and trans politics at the level of representation. In a roundtable discussion of the series, Moya Bailey, micha cárdenas, Laura Horak, Lokeilani Kaimana, Cael M. Keegan, Genevieve Newman, Raffi Sarkissian and Rox Samer (Bailey et. al. 2017) were, in the main, excited by *Sense8* and positive about its attempts to create new representations of race, gender, sexuality, and national identity. Nonetheless, participants were not without censure. For example, cárdenas says the “series relies on western colonial conceptions for its global imagination.” (Bailey et. al. 2017). Bailey is, in turn, critical of the series’ racial representations arguing,

“when race is acknowledged in the show it is done so to support the white characters’ development [and that] the writing team of *Sense8* cannot imagine non-Western characters of color as instigators and occupiers of their own desires.” (Bailey et. al. 2017).



Wolfgang blows up a helicopter.



Will in savior mode.

Fans invested in the non-Western characters might contest this interpretation, however. And western colonial critiques may be rooted in overly realist readings of a science fiction series that uses its genre to resist such readings. On the one hand, some cultural stereotyping in *Sense8* repeats generic tropes—Jonas is a mystical Indian, Sun and Mun are martial arts experts, Kala is a virginal Indian beauty, and Will is a white cop with a savior complex.

On the other hand, important developments challenge narrative stereotypes—Lito is a gay action film star, Nomi is a transgender character in one of the series’ most loving relationships, and the entire cluster is a defensive rather than offensive coming together of a rag-bag of individuals. *Sense8* may sometimes trip over its own plot, but the most action-filled moments are often opportunities for subtle overthrowing of conventions engineered by witty juxtapositions of characters, their skills and their personae. Characters who are not straight, white, male or cisgender frequently save the day; crucially, no-one thinks to label this surprising or exceptional.

Ultimately, however, any appraisal of what *Sense8* achieves, such as in the anthology *Sense8: Transcending Television* (authors 2021), should recognize that the series is part of a much larger televisual process instead of a stand-alone product. Like the sensates learning to live in and as a cluster, *Sense8* exists alongside and amongst other Netflix original series that feature and explore racial and sexual diversity and equality and provide a space for evolution. These fellow series include the pre-*Sense8* prison-set *Orange is the New Black* (2013-19), which depicts a closed world in which diverse female characters are given only as much agency and humor as is possible in a system that marginalizes and brutalizes them (Shaw and Stone 2017). And the post-*Sense8* school-set *Sex Education* (2019-present) features diverse, libidinous youngsters who find self-realization in friendship and explore the joy and anguish that comes with pride and sexual discoveries. As *Sense8* told its viewers at the start of its run, so now its viewers can return the thankful sentiment: “You are no longer just you.”



Nomi and Amanita's rainbow colored dildo.

Coda: “limbic resonance”

The green light that Netflix gave to the Wachowskis was one of the streaming network's earliest moves in a strategy of commissioning original programming. Accordingly, the series had no need to prime its medium for the shock of its newness. Nevertheless, there were obvious predecessors such as *Star Trek*, which also used the science-fiction genre to examine diversity, otherness and tolerance, but it took that franchise almost fifty years to go from its first scripted inter-racial kiss in S03:E10 ‘Plato's Stepchildren’ in 1968 to same-sex marriage in the S01:E05 ‘Choose Your Pain’ episode of the Netflix reboot *Star Trek: Discovery* in 2017. The *Star Trek* world is a different ethical galaxy, perhaps, but *Sense8* started with a Black woman pleasuring her transgender, white female lover with a strap-on rainbow-colored dildo in S01:E01: ‘Limbic Resonance’ and ended with a shot of that emblematic dildo in the series finale (S02:E12).

Instead of using a tentative approach to reviving atrophied hopes of what television writ-large might be capable of, *Sense8* offered viewers a re-boot of sleeping household screens. It was racially diverse without selling anything or standing for office, as queer as could be without ghettoizing its appeal, sexually startling without ever being less than swooningly romantic, and it was fast, colorful, and punctuated by great music. It was fun and it was hot. It was never meant to be perfect. It was an avant-garde attack on prudery, fear and loneliness. Indeed, the triumph of *Sense8* is that it offers an account of the way that we all, however inexactly, function, communicate and consider ourselves as both alone and as participants in our own clusters, whether they be local or global, social or political, sexual or sentimental, real or virtual. It demonstrated that radical empathy, which created a novel sensibility and converted it into action, was not just a science-fiction gimmick that empowered characters with superpowers. Rather, such empathy was within reach of its audience too, not just to write a fitting end to the series but to take a fresh look at their own lives and start anew. In its celebration of interconnectedness as the means to inhabiting other selves, *Sense8* not only transcended television but suggested that it was necessary to queer the world in order to save it.



The cover of *Sense8: Transcending Television* (forthcoming from Bloomsbury 2021).

Notes

1. This article has been adapted from the introduction to the forthcoming co-edited book, *Sense8: Transcending Television* (Bloomsbury, 2021). [[return to page 1](#)]
2. In a case of life drawing from art, moreover, it is noteworthy that *Sense8*'s Jamie Clayton (one of the first trans actors to play a trans character, alongside Laverne Cox in Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*) secured a series of roles after playing Nomi. Clayton also gained international recognition for her performances by the Human Rights campaign Time To Thrive and was cast as the American President's sister-in-law in *Designated Survivor* (2016-19) and as Tess Van de Berg in the sequel to the Showtime cult series *The L Word* (2004-9) entitled *The L Word: Generation Q* (2019). [[return to page 3](#)]

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



In this scene in *dys4ia*, the queer individual is represented as a shield to render the necessity of protection against trans-exclusionary feminists.

The queer politics of stealth gameplay

by [Toni Pape](#)

Anna Anthropy's *dys4ia* is an "autobiographical game about [the developer's] experiences with hormone replacement" and gender dysphoria (*dys4ia*). The first of the game's short levels addresses "Gender Bullshit", including a number of issues ranging from the humiliation of shaving to transphobic feminism. The moment that opens this article concerns Anthropy's use of a public toilet for women. The graphics, reminiscent of the 8-bit era, provide an abstract depiction of a public toilet. The green (gender dysmorphic) creature that serves as the player's avatar is positioned toward the bottom of the playable area and is tasked to reach the green toilet bowl at the top of the screen. However, the way to the toilet bowl is blocked by other women who repeatedly open and close the doors to their stalls, also creating areas of (yellow) illumination that would force the avatar into uncomfortable visibility. For fear of disturbing the space's normative assumptions regarding gender presentation and the consequences they might have to face for visibly diverging from such gender norms, the green creature wants to stay under the radar, does not want to be perceived. The gameplay solution to this problem is to pass the stalls occupied by other women in the moment their doors are closed. By contrast, walking into the light leads to immediate failure.

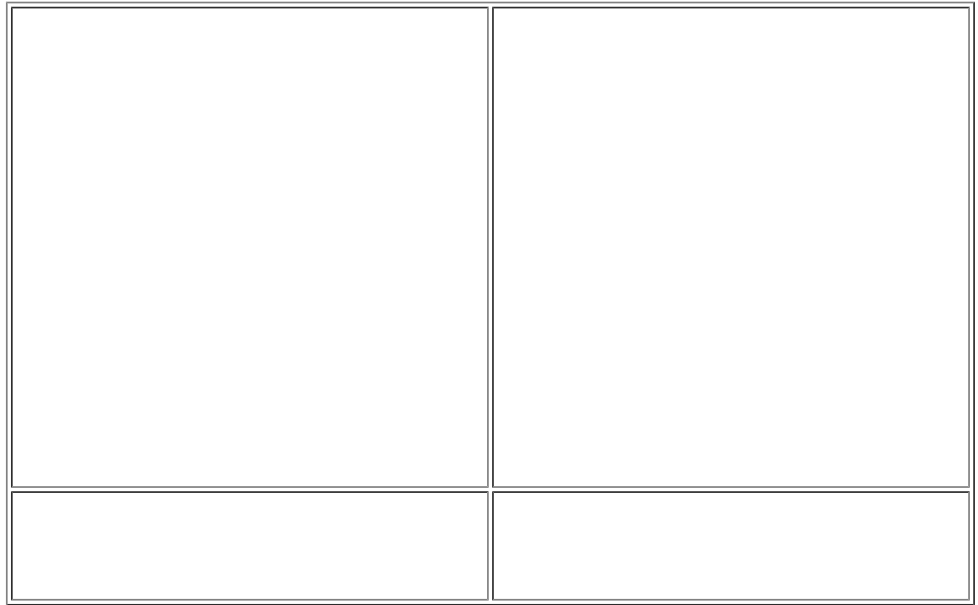


This scene in *dys4ia* speaks to the experience of being misgendered.



This scene in *dys4ia* addresses the 'humiliating' experience of dealing with beard growth on a female-identified body.

This is stealth gameplay in a strict, albeit rudimentary form: The success of the mission is dependent on the avatar's simulated imperceptibility. Suspecting herself to be an unwelcome presence, Anthropy tries to make herself imperceptible. "I feel like a spy whenever I use the women's bathroom," she



confides at the bottom of the screen, making the connection between living a non-normative gender and a surreptitious mode of political action. This connection is by no means incidental (Garber 1997, 234-266). In fact, the very expression “going stealth” is “used by many transgender-identified people to describe nondisclosure of transgender status” (Beauchamp 2019, 34). In this particular instance, then, the basic stealth mechanic implemented in this segment of *dys4ia* articulates “a *tactic* for escaping state surveillance or persecution” or other, more immediate acts of violence that gender-nonconforming individuals regularly face (48, emphasis added). Thus, in order to aesthetically render tactical imperceptibility as a technique for mental and physical self-protection and survival, Anna Anthropy, an artist who is strongly committed to queer politics, relies on the gameplay mechanics of stealth video games to present her queer life experience. Queerness is, at least occasionally, stealthy.



The six doors to the toilet stalls occupied by women open and close alternatingly, with three of them open and them of them closed at any given time. The player can only move in front of closed doors.



DreamDaddy (GameGrumps, 2017) is dating simulator about gay dads. An example of queer representation in video games.



The romance between Ellie and Dina in *The Last of Us: Part 2* is another example of queer representation in games. This romance was one reason why the game got 'review bombed' by users on platforms like Metacritic.

This article tests the reverse hypothesis: If queerness is occasionally stealthy, can stealth gameplay, in turn, be considered queer? Starting from this question, the article will study the aesthetic experience of stealth gameplay in two of its subgenres, sneaking stealth and social stealth. After a brief consideration of gameplay and its potential for processual queering, the argument first addresses the game *Dishonored 2: Death of the Outsider* (Arkane 2017) to articulate how sneaking stealth enables a relational engagement toward queer survival. Subsequently, the analysis will turn to the social stealth of the *Hitman* series (IO Interactive 2016-2021) to argue that stealth participates in an environmental mode of power that, following the work of Brian Massumi, will be called *ontopower* (2015). In the final section, I will draw conclusions regarding the relevance of stealth gameplay to queer political practice more broadly, suggesting that the aesthetic experience of stealth gameplay creates an appetite for the formation of a disavowed, yet persistent undercommons whose political efficacy resides in the uncompromising transformation of a normative, oppressive order from within (Harney and Moten 2013).

Queering gameplay

Queering is often associated with the resistance to and breaking of norms, what Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson call queer theory's "primary commitment to antinormativity" (2015: 1). In the case of video games then, a practice of queering would have to test and undermine the norms of gameplay itself. Besides the important question of queer or LGBTQ+ representation in videogames, this raises the questions of, first, how what one does in videogames is grounded in certain norms that order and give sense to player activity and, second, in what way these norms can be and have been challenged by players and developers. In key with this understanding, Edmond Chang defines what he calls *queergaming* as follows:

"Queergaming engages different grammars of play, radical play, not grounded in normative ideologies like competition, exploitation, colonization, speed, violence, rugged individualism, leveling up, and win states. [...] How might we develop game play and end states that invite exploration, cooperation, complexity, meditation, ambivalence, alternative spaces, even failure?" (Chang 2017, 19)



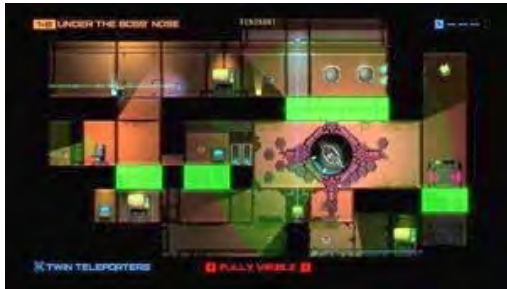
In the role-playing game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), the player can have various genders and species, including Bull. In the first screenshot, Bull gallantly invites the player to dance. In the second, they have consummated their passion.

The challenge to "normative ideologies" or values surely plays an important role

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This promotional image for *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019) gives a good impression of the multiplayer action in shooting games, illustrating some of the elements foregrounded in the text.



Stealth Inc. (Curve, contains 2011-15) presents the player with environmental puzzles. Here the little clone in the top left of the screen has to get to the door at the right of the screen, avoiding lasers and cameras. Many puzzles cover just one screen, which means the game consists of a series of self-contained challenges.

in queergaming or queer gameplay. To provide a brief sketch of such gameplay norms, let's consider shooting games.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Many shooting games cast conflict as the confrontation between a (*hyper*)*masculine hero*—which can be a generic soldier type or a fleshed-out character—and a swath of generic enemies with an infinite supply of back-up. Here, the hero is often a resolute, relatively independent agent ready to take decisive action. Conventionally, the player's task is to navigate intricate maps to find strategic advantages, such as a safe cover spot from which the enemy is vulnerable, so that the player can then decimate the enemy's ranks. This is often, and importantly, done by means of various *firearms*.

My interest here is less in the representation of guns itself and more in how firearms in shooting games organize and distribute in-game action across the gamespace. While close combat or “melee combat” and even some stealth options are integrated in many recent shooting games, the emphasis in armed combat is on *relatively distant targets* which, in turn, foregrounds the equipment's imagined prowess—and by extension the avatar's and the player's combat prowess. The more powerful one's weapons are, the more *damage* they can do. The higher the weapons' *range*, the better they can reach distant targets. Consequently, many first-person shooters are closely linked to conventional notions of *warfare as force-on-force combat* in a relatively open arena between at least two fronts whose strength and number are more or less known to one another. For instance, when playing a shooting game online, it is very important that the teams are more or less equally strong in numbers and experience. For this purpose, shooting games create *equality of chances* through matching algorithms. In this way, the gameplay mechanics suggest that warfare is grounded in a *symmetric distribution of power* between two or more combatting parties that are roughly equal in strength. The following analyses will show that many of these conventions are suspended in stealth gameplay.

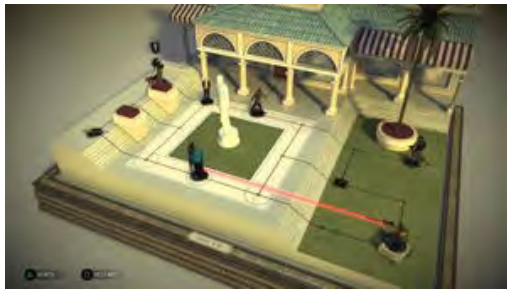
But note that when Chang suggests that “queergaming engages different grammars of play,” he does not so much advocate a straightforward resistance to normativity as a sidestepping in the sense Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes:

“*Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object” (2003, 8).

In other words, queer gameplay is not necessarily about a resistance to normative gameplay conventions, but a style of play that introduces and performatively affirms values that are bracketed by or subsumed under more normative values such as competition, exploitation, speed, etc. Queering, then, is not only or necessarily a moving-up-against and can also be a divergent repetition or



Volume (Mike Bithell Games, 2015) is a 3D stealth game. The player's avatar, the black stick figure in the middle, has to reach the level's endpoint without being spotted by the guards. The main campaign consists of 100 levels or environmental stealth puzzles.



Hitman Go (Square Enix Montreal, 2014) is a turn-based puzzle game that combines *Hitman*'s stealth gameplay with the mechanics of the Chinese strategy game Go.

distortion of a conventional gameplay mechanics. As the opening example of *dys4ia* indicates, stealth's sidestepping can be a moving past, alongside or with the qualities of 'enemy' movement for the purpose of evasion (Pape 2017, 45). Thus, the queer potential of stealth gameplay must also be associated with that play style's tendency to enact perceptual ecologies that allow the player to become imperceptible within a dominant, oppressive surveillance network by inflecting and rerouting its violent tendencies and operations. As a result, certain habits of dualistic thinking—including the opposition between normativity and anti-normative queerness—may need to be reconsidered.

In their linguistic discussion of the various senses of "queer," Mel Y. Chen foregrounds that the verbal use of queer—as in 'to queer' or 'queering'—"is a process comprising developments of relations along a time path" (2012, 75). This is crucially important in conjunction with Chang's definition because it allows for a slight shift in analytical focus away from the verb's transitive object, the 'something' to be queered, to the process of queering itself as it unfolds over time and how that process 'develops'—that is, unfolds, deforms, twists and shifts—the fields of relation it encounters. Therefore, the present account foregrounds the temporalities and relationality of stealth gameplay. This methodological lens complicates any understanding of stealth as a clear strategy of resistance, for instance to the surveillance of queer individuals and communities, or ultimately entirely complicit with, say, the military-entertainment complex which at least some stealth games belong to. In fact, this understanding of queering as fundamentally processual questions the productivity (not the possibility, however) of queer as a fixed positionality—identitarian, political or otherwise. The queer politics of stealth are a politics of process.

Sneaking stealth: queer survival in *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*

Sneaking stealth can be meaningfully distinguished from other subgenres of stealth gameplay such as social stealth and what one might call puzzle stealth. In sneaking stealth, the player's task is to become-imperceptible by blending into the material and perceptual environment. This can be done by using secret passages, manipulating light sources and using shadows, distracting enemies or 'luring' them to places where they can no longer perceive the player character. One can also lure them toward the player character for a silent takedown (lethal or nonlethal, according to one's play style). Depending on the game, there may be other gameplay mechanics that enhance the player's sneaking opportunities.

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Social stealth, in contrast, relies on becoming-imperceptible by means of disguises: If the player wants to infiltrate, say, a guarded estate, they might be able to gain access by donning the uniform of the gardening crew working at that estate. Thus, social stealth is about hiding in plain sight or *passing* as the following section will elaborate in detail. Finally, puzzle stealth provides puzzles whose rules articulate a symbolic concern for imperceptibility such as “don’t touch the red laser” or “don’t enter the (movable) camera’s field of view.” Some games in this subgenre, such as *Stealth, Inc.* (Curve, 2013), foreground dexterity and timing. Others like *Invisible, Inc.* (Klei Entertainment, 2015) and *Hitman Go* (Square Enix, 2014) are turn-based games that focus on strategy. I do not consider puzzle stealth in this article because their fairly strict rule systems oftentimes (but not always) require a more rationalist approach (instead of a strong relational engagement with a material environment) and thus also inhibit the processual queering of gameplay that can be observed in sneaking and social stealth.



Dishonored: Death of the Outsider (Bethesda, 2017) is the third instalment in the *Dishonored* series and belongs to the genre of sneaking stealth. Set in the steampunk-inspired Empire of the Isles, the series initially revolves around a battle for the throne. In the first instalment, empress Jessamine Caldwin is assassinated, her throne usurped by the Lord Regent, and the royal guard turned against anyone loyal to the late empress. As a result, the empress’ royal protector—and playable character of *Dishonored*—Corvo Atano is arrested and their daughter Emily Caldwin, heiress to the throne, is kidnapped. Corvo Atano,

A view of the fictional steam-punk city Karnaca, where much of *Dishonored 2* and *Death of the Outsider* are set.

controlled by the player, manages to escape and must now stealthily navigate a tight surveillance apparatus to vanquish the Lord Regent and instate Emily Caldwin as the rightful empress. The basic plot of *Dishonored 2* is rather similar, with Delilah Copperspoon serving as an alternative villain who usurps the throne of the now adult Emily Caldwin. One notable difference, both in terms of representation and gameplay, consists in the fact that the player can now choose between playing the game as Corvo Atano or Emily Caldwin herself. Their shared goal is to regain the throne and protect their monarchy. Initially, then, this is not a very queer project as Eli Dobromylskyj shows (2019).



Billie Lurk, the main character of *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*.

In these two titles, Billie Lurk (Rosario Dawson)—a queer black woman—figures as a secondary (non-playable) character whose loyalties vary starkly due to her marginalized status.

“Unlike Corvo, [whose] swordsmanship earned him the royal protector position, she has moved laterally, rather than up the social ladder: from starving orphan, to thief, to assassin—not for any noble end, but for basic survival” (Cole 2017).



The Outsider, the sacrificial protector of the oppressive metaphysical order in the *Dishonored's* steampunk world.

Trying to escape abuse and sex work as a child, young Billie Lurk ultimately becomes an assassin, an occupation that soon makes her an outcast and pariah, a status she'll keep throughout the series. In *Dishonored 2*, she lives in hiding as Meagan Foster on her ship the Dreadful Whale before her identity is revealed to the player. During the day, Meagan Foster deals in contraband. At night, she dreams of her lost lover Deirdre. *Death of the Outsider* is the third and so far last game in the series. In this instalment, the player for the first time controls Billie in her quest to destroy the Outsider, the supernatural being that resides in the metaphysical dimension of the Void and is the source of magic in the world of *Dishonored*.

Billie Lurk's biography is important inasmuch it explains both her relative social invisibility as a marginalized, dispossessed individual and her hypervisibility as a criminal (for instance on “Wanted!” posters placarded around the game world). Hence, Billie Lurk resorts to stealth in order to actively and systematically “refuse the terms of visibility imposed on” her (Hartman 2020, 18). Stealth allows her to tactically occupy the spaces that elude surveillance and control, the interstices within her hostile surroundings, an outside that is immanent to the oppressive world she inhabits. Billie Lurk is in “refusal of what has been refused” (Harney and Moten 2013, 96), so much so that she intends to upend the very metaphysics of the world she inhabits by eliminating the Outsider.[2] She, too, must surreptitiously sneak through a world full of danger and achieve her goals by



A Wanted poster for Billie Lurk.

subterfuge rather than open confrontation. In this admittedly convoluted plot synopsis, one keyword for the following gameplay analysis is magic. Magic is crucial to Billie Lurk's queer project of survival by stealth.

In addition to this backstory, the character design for Billie Lurk/Meagan Foster further motivates and supports the queer gameplay of the series. In a number of ways, the character design in *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* deviates from the gun-toting, hypermasculine heroes of many action games. As gaming journalist Riley MacLeod points out, this deviation is conventional in stealth games:

"The bodies in stealth games are different. In most cases the biggest fantasy they embody is having astonishingly reliable knees; otherwise they tend to be smaller, 'weaker,' not necessarily good at fighting. [...] Without the bombast of shooter bodies to draw your eyes to explosions, stealth bodies are often adorned with little nuances: Garrett's hands dance over the edges of paintings and the wheels of safes; *Mark of the Ninja's* ninja swoops, dangles, slides, and crouches with luxurious elegance." (MacLeod 2015, n.p.)[3]

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JUMP CUT

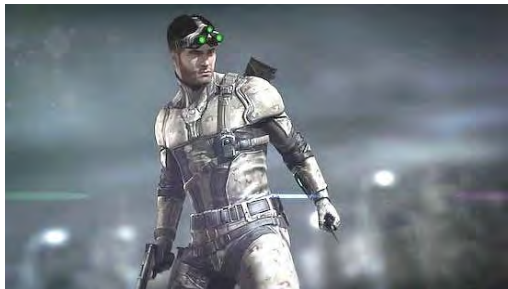
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Garrett, the ambidextrous protagonist and playable character of the stealth game series *Thief*.



Adam Jensen, the cyborg protagonist and playable character of the game series *Deus Ex*.



Sam Fisher, the prowling protagonist and playable character of the stealth game series *Splinter Cell*.

Indeed, regarding character design and narrative development, stealth is often presented as a viable tactical solution for a character who is either unarmed, inexperienced in combat, hopelessly outnumbered or—as in the recent *Tomb Raider* reboot (Square Enix, 2013)—all of the above (Pape 2017, 639-640). In terms of character design, then, stealth games disavow the above-mentioned combat prowess and equality of chances, thus opening up a space for characters whose appearance and abilities deviate from the more conventional masculinity of shooting games. Importantly, developers themselves often speak of the characters they design in ways that are not exactly reminiscent of normative masculinities. For example, at the 2014 Game Developers Conference, Kristjan Zadziuk from Ubisoft Toronto described Sam Fisher, the main character of *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*, as “catlike,” “always in motion,” “on the prowl” (“Animating the Spy Fantasy”). Yet, for all their queer tendencies, these avatars present what can still be subsumed under the identitarian position of the ‘stealth-universal-white-[queer] man,’ to paraphrase José Muñoz (2009, 94). It is this positionality that *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* attempts to undo in both narrative and gameplay.

Billie Lurk herself is a trained assassin who single-handedly takes on a complex network of corrupt powerful individuals, their imperial guards as well as the metaphysical realm of the Void protected by the Outsider. Safe to say that she is systemically marginalised and massively outnumbered within the fiction of *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*. Furthermore, the character design involves temporalities that are adequately described as queer: In the *Dishonored* series, certain player actions have an impact on the game world. For instance, the player can always choose whether to kill or spare a target, with either option having an impact on the continuation of the story. If, in *Dishonored 2*, the player prevents the descent into madness of a character named Aramis Stilton (also implied to have more than homosocial attractions) by means of time travel, this will change Billie Lurk/Meagan Foster’s timeline:

When we first meet her as Meagan Foster in *Dishonored 2*, she has lost her right eye and lower right arm, mutilations she has incurred by indeterminate events in the past. If the player saves Stilton *in the past* (by means of a time travel conceit), the events that produce Meagan’s disabilities never occur. Once the player returns from saving Aramis Stilton, Meagan Foster is unharmed: The gameplay thus creates mutually exclusive representations of the same character, granting redress for past suffering through time travel. *Death of the Outsider* deforms the temporalities of Billie Lurk’s life once more: the Outsider catches up with the unharmed Billie, suggesting that she had cheated fate and must now fulfill her role in the world of the Empire of the Isles. He therefore takes her eye and arm and ‘gifts’ Billie Lurk with steampunk prostheses endowed with magic. Retrospectively, Billie’s physical transformation and reliance on prostheses seem to have been inevitable, but they are also affirmed as that which *enables* her to constructively participate in the world.

The magic with which she is newly endowed allows the game to stage an encounter between two different ways of approaching the (game) world. Billie has a variety of powers—called Displace, Void Strike and Semblance—that allow her to intervene in and modulate her environment. For purposes of demonstration, consider the ways in which Displace and Semblance allow the player to complete a small task in the mission “Follow the Ink.” During “Follow the Ink”, the player has







Billie Lurk/Meagan Foster unharmed (left) and disabled by the loss of her right eye and lower arm (right).

to obtain a key from a character called Ivan Jacobi who is practicing a speech on a plaza, surrounded by guards.

These guards perform the conventional approach to the game world described in the previous section: They are huge brutes and virtuoso swordsmen ready to defend their territory at the sight of an enemy. Their intersecting perceptual and defensive abilities layer themselves on top of the game space as what, following Judith Butler, can usefully be called an “exclusionary matrix,” that is, a tight network of modes of action and perception the goal of which, in this case, is to maintain an exclusionary and oppressive status quo (2011, xiii). This matrix makes the fictional game space dangerous and uninhabitable for the player character at all times. The alternative—arguably queer—way of approaching the world is that of the non-conforming individual placed in such an environment. Billie Lurk does not respect the exclusionary matrix that attempts to order her every movement. But instead of confronting this matrix head-on, the stealthy individual favors an approach that allows it to move through the matrix undetected.

The most important magic ability to this end is Displace, which allows Billie to teleport across short distances. [4] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) With the help of this ability, the player can avoid enemy sightline by displacing to otherwise inaccessible corners and passageways. Thus, during “Follow the Ink”, Billie can obtain the required key by carefully analyzing the game space for the guards’ placement, movement and perception and then displacing into the ‘blind spots’ of their surveillance matrix. This ultimately allows the player to activate a trapdoor that is part of the stage on which Ivan Jacobi practices his speech. Once Jacobi has fallen through the trapdoor, Billie can simply pick up the key.

| | |
|--|--|
|  |  |
| Billie Lurk uses magic to 'Displace' from one building to the balcony of another building. The arrow symbol in the white circle at the top left indicates that the 'Displace' ability has been selected. | In the basement she finds a whole in the wall that she can move through to get below the courtyard on which her target Ivan Jacobi is practicing his speech. |
|  |  |
| Billie performs a non-lethal takedown on a guard by means of an electric bolt. The guard would otherwise have spotted her. | Now Billie can place herself right underneath the trapdoor..... |
| | |



... and operate the lever that opens the trapdoor.



Ivan Jacobi falls through the trapdoor and becomes unconscious. Billie can loot the key she needed. Other guards are alerted by the accident.

Or, if the player wants to entirely avoid taking out Ivan Jacobi, they may use the Semblance ability, which allows Billie to temporarily take on the appearance of any other subdued non-playable character (NPC) in the game. Thus, if the player makes Billie Lurk take on the appearance of a subdued enemy guard, she can walk straight into the plaza area, position herself in the backstage area and simply pickpocket the key from Ivan Jacobi without further laying hands on him .



Click on image: Walkthrough of "Follow the Ink" mission in *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*. In this walkthrough, the player obtains the key from Ivan Jacobi using the Displace ability.



Click on image: Walkthrough of "Follow the Ink" mission in

Dishonored: Death of the Outsider. In this walkthrough, the player obtains the key from Ivan Jacobi using the Semblance ability.

This very brief example is intended to indicate *Dishonored's* complex stealth mechanics more generally: every step of every mission is a matter of surreptitiously and creatively sidestepping or undoing a series of minor and major obstacles placed throughout the game world. The gamer operating the marginal individual disposes of various different ways of bending the game world to their will. Within the industrial logic of the gaming industry, such a wealth of player choice must of course also be interpreted as an attempt at creating a complex and responsive world, catering to different play styles. In terms of gameplay, however, the same mechanics first and foremost infuse the exclusionary matrix with just enough wiggle room to let players discover and invent their own mode of divergent survival.

The wealth of player options for the purpose of achieving a simple, unchanging goal—imperceptibility—allows for “emergent gameplay,” that is, it lets players invent solutions that the game developers may never have had in mind. In other words, the gameplay design provides a certain degree of player freedom which, in turn, fosters a creative engagement with the game systems that can range from careful planning to lucky improvisation and that can produce novel solutions to familiar problems. (The effects of emergent gameplay can also exceed the requirements of any given situation and produce solutions to unknown problems or reveal entirely new ways of playing a game.) This is one of the main functions of magic in *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*: It makes the relational field of the game world malleable and conducive to modulation by stealth and, thus, continued existence. To put it in the words of Kara Keeling, the magic-infused sneaking stealth of *Dishonored* lets players *perform*

“a conception of the world in which certain things that official common sense deems irrational—voodoo, magic, communicating with spirits, seeing nonchronological time—operate to make the world appear reasonable and amenable to their [avatars'] survival” (153).

As the word “appear” indicates, such approach to the world sidesteps concerns of physical strength and force-on-force combat in favor of a thorough engagement with the world's perceptibility. It is through this preoccupation with perceptibility that stealth gameplay and queer politics encounter one another, as MacLeod confirms:

“In many ways navigating space in a stealth game feels similar to my daily life as a trans man. As someone who spends a lot of time in cis gay male spaces, there's a ritualized literacy I apply when doing something like entering a new bar for the first time. [...] I read a space for entrances and exits both architectural and interpersonal, signposts for steering through what should be but never is an innocuous evening out. [...] There's a certain secret cartography to navigating the world as trans that imbues things with different pitfalls and possibilities, where I'm asked to see the world as a series of puzzles more than a place I get to live.” (MacLeod)

Stealth gameplay speaks to the experience of queer survival because it similarly resists the normative and foreclosing mechanisms of the tightly-knit, exclusionary matrix by continuously mapping and enacting an environment's affordances for continued existence—be it with the help of magic as in *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* or without as in many other stealth games. Moreover, it becomes clear that stealth is not mainly about finding ad-hoc solutions to unforeseen dangers; rather, it involves a “literacy” or skillfulness at entering and modulating fields of relation. (This is a skill because, as McLeod suggests, habitual perception is



Billie Lurk uses her 'Semblance' ability to take on the appearance of an enemy guard. The mask symbol in the white circle at the top left indicates that the 'Semblance' ability has been selected.



Billie moves right across the courtyard and through enemies. The enemy's glowing eyes and the mask in Billie's hand indicate that 'Semblance' is currently in use.



In this way Billie can place herself behind the 'stage' on which Ivan Jacobi practices his speech and paces back and forth.



Once Ivan Jacobi paces over to the backdrop of the stage, Billie can “pickpocket” the key through the gap in the stage backdrop.



A view of the town Sapienza, one of the 'sandbox' levels in Hitman (IO Interactive, 2016).



A view of the harbor of Sapienza.

processually attuned to creative world-making for queer survival; in stealth, perception is immediately political.) The very point of stealth gameplay and its queer modes of perceiving and moving is to turn the game world's exclusionary matrix into an “open mesh of possibilities” (Sedgwick 1994: 8). Of course, such perceptual prowess and virtuoso stealth are simulated fictions. And they are experienced, at least by some, as queer power fantasies. As such, they should not be dismissed, however.

Instead, it can be noted that a game like *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* allows queer individuals to practice and *successfully experience* stealth not only as a politics of tactical survival but also as a productive reorientation of the surrounding world. Second, such a tactical movement with the world relies on stealth gameplay's emphasis on relational processes of dis- and reordering a hostile perceptual field to create space and safe passage for a deviant other. If we remember that one can (and is incentivized to) play the entire *Dishonored* series without killing a single individual, it becomes clear that this queer power fantasy is also tendentially non-violent. Finally, the calm, almost meditative joy of moving through an entire game world unbothered gives the stealth gameplay of *Dishonored* an experiential quality that I venture to call therapeutic. To a queer player who has tactically proceeded through a complex, hostile space to accomplish every mission of the game *without* being detected even once and *without* causing any harm, the complex and oftentimes hostile world they inhabit can feel more manageable. Curiously and counter-intuitively perhaps, in stealth gameplay one can be at peace.

Social stealth: hiding in plain sight in a camp world

In general, the findings of the previous section also hold for social stealth. Its methods of queering the world, however, are different. Social stealth is about hiding in plain sight, mainly by taking on certain social roles in the form of disguises and sometimes by blending into crowds. At its core, then, the gameplay mechanics of social stealth are about practices of dissimulation and passing. This section will look at the video game series *Hitman* to demonstrate how its protagonist, Agent 47, uses disguises to rearrange his environment into a liveable world.

What is a disguise? A disguise is not simply an outfit or a costume, especially if we think of a costume as something that announces its theatricality and fictionality. Following the dictum “Clothes make the man,” Swiss literary scholar Peter von Matt explores the anthropological dimension of disguises and suggests that a function of the disguise is to temporarily unmake and remake not only our social location but the very idea of a social location determined by one's appearance:

“If all clothing [*Kleidung*] gives access to me as a person, if I—who am inevitably a social being—am determined by my clothing, then each disguise [*Ver-Kleidung*] becomes an act of freedom against that fundamental injunction. Under my disguise, I am neither naked nor clothed; I am like Adam” (von Matt, 83).

Von Matt points out that donning a disguise is not simply a matter of substituting one socially localized identity for another. Processually speaking, disguises produce a qualitative change in our perception of reality. Von Matt explains this qualitative change as a return to the Biblical paradise, a time before any distinctions—such as that between ‘clothed’ and ‘naked’—existed in the first place. While my present account eschews conceptually following von Matt to paradise (and its binary gender model), I am interested in the idea of an existence prior to distinctions or categories because it helps explain how stealth gameplay lets players intervene in a game environment in ways that can be described as



The Villa of Silvio Caruso, Agent 47's target, seen from the harbor. The villa is the yellow-ish building at the top. Below is the secret underground toxin laboratory.



Villa Caruso seen from the top of a nearby ruin.



Silvio Caruso, Agent 47's target, in the garden of his villa estate.

queering. In the present account, the preferred concept to articulate this phase of existence is what Brian Massumi calls *bare activity*. Bare activity is the incipient phase of reality-as-experienced in which all activities, tendencies and potentials commingle and struggle to make ingress into reality.

"Bare activity: the just-beginning-to-stir of the event coming into its newness out of the soon to be prior background activity it will have left creatively behind" (Massumi 2011, 2-3).

In other words, bare activity describes the phase during which pre-subjectivities and "pre-objectivities" are forming and informing one another to relationally actualize as provisional, temporarily localizable and distinguishable subjects and objects. As von Matt suggests, disguises allow individuals to undo such temporarily fixed subject positions and engage in the active and ongoing production of subjectivities. Bringing von Matt and Massumi together, the following analysis demonstrates the broader hypothesis that social stealth allows players to harness the (simulated) richness of bare activity to inflect what will be experienced as reality in the game world.

The *Hitman* series (IO Interactive, 2000-2021) especially since its reboot in 2016, can be described as an old-school spy fantasy. The player operates the nondescript, mannequin-esque master assassin only known as Agent 47. Agent 47 is the result of a cloning experiment the goal of which was to create a series of impassible assassins, all clones of one another and distinguished by the iconic barcode on the back of their head. Created in 1964, Agent 47 was raised in a Romanian asylum under the tutelage of cruel German scientist Dr. Otto Ort-Meyer and trained in combat and weaponry. Experimental serums were used to suppress adolescent 47's memories and feelings. The latest instalment *Hitman 2* (2018) spends a lot of its narrative (but not gameplay) on letting Agent 47 revisit his dark past, find a childhood friend from the asylum and take down some of the people responsible for his life as an instrument of violence. In terms of gameplay, this backstory allows for an avatar that functions as a resourceful cipher without personal memories or attachments, a mannequin to be dressed in myriad disguises.



Agent 47 in various disguises. The disguises allow Agent 47/the player to access different areas of the game world.

Agent 47's expertise in social stealth by means of disguises is crucial for how the



Agent 47 is about to subdue a waiter to obtain a waiter disguise.



Agent 47 hides the unconscious waiter in a nearby dumpster.

player can make the avatar relate to the game's complex fictional environments. *Hitman* games are constructed as series of separate missions, each set in a dense and complex setting with a distinct sense of locale. For the purpose of demonstration, consider the memorable Italian seaside resort Sapienza with its lively piazza and picturesque church, its underground toxin laboratory and seaplane landing site in a grotto and many more ridiculously over-the-top espionage clichés (see "[HITMAN—Welcome to Sapienza](#)"). The important thing to note for now is that the most recent instalments in the series (from 2016, 2018, and 2021 respectively) have big sandbox levels, meaning that they create a vast, interconnected and responsive world in which the player can invent hundreds of different ways to accomplish the kill missions of Agent 47.

These game spaces are really places in the strong sense of the word in that they are settings composed of complex, interlocking relational fields with different social functions and meaning. Each place is made up of numerous smaller social microcosms which allow or preclude Agent 47's access based on his social role. In Sapienza, for instance, there is the microcosm of the café by the Piazza. Dressed in the "Italian suit" with which Agent 47 starts the mission, the player can only access the customer area of the café; they cannot go behind the counter or into the backrooms of the café, where they might find useful items such as rat poison for (nonlethally) incapacitating an individual. Exploring the area, the player can spot an employee of the café who is having a cigarette break in the back alley. The player can now subdue the employee, disguise himself by donning the employee's outfit and, ideally, hide the employee's unconscious body to avoid unwelcome attention. In this disguise, Agent 47 is now relatively imperceptible in the café; 'relatively' because in *Hitman* there is almost always one NPC in every social sphere who sees through Agent 47's disguise. The manager of the café is likely to know his personnel and will probably perceive that Agent 47 is trespassing.

Social stealth is always precarious in this sense. Trespassing in and of itself is not a problem; it is even helpfully indicated by a yellow marker in the minimap at the bottom left corner of the screen. This happens in the gameplay video referred to above when the player drags the unconscious kitchen assistant into the basement of the café. Yet, the "Trespassing" indicator signals that Agent 47 is not (yet) wearing the appropriate disguise for his current location and that he would be confronted if he were detected by another NPC familiar with the café. And that would be the end of a playthrough aiming for "no detections", which rewards a higher mission score. (Thus, higher mission scores act as a way to incentivize stealthy gameplay even when it is not strictly necessary.) The "Trespassing" indicator lets the player know that they are at an increased risk of being detected; Agent 47 is just below the threshold of perceptibility and this is where he needs to remain for the purpose of bare-actively informing the world around him. The smallest mistake suffices to expose the entire infiltration mission. Success is



Agent 47 is now wearing the waiter disguise.

always a narrow escape.[5]



Click on image: Hitman mission “Sapienza”, in which Agent 47 first acquires the disguise of an employee, which enables him to non-lethally poison his mission target’s therapist Dr. Silvio Caruso. After donning the therapist’s outfit, agent 47 is able to walk right into his target’s mansion.

From this short example, one can extrapolate the overall gameplay experience that each mission of *Hitman* requires. Sapienza is a socially diverse place that is divided into dozens of sometimes mutually exclusive, sometimes overlapping territories to which Agent 47 has no access, at least not by default. However, these territories become accessible through disguises and, in this seaside resort alone, Agent 47 can wear up to 26 disguises, most of which give the avatar a generic professional role such as store clerk, delivery man, church staff, mansion staff, gardener or bodyguard. By subduing people, donning their clothes as a disguise, and tactically changing disguises every few minutes, the player can—little by little, step by step—make Agent 47 walk up right to his target.



Agent 47 can enter the kitchen area to pick up a box of ‘Emetic Rat Poison.’ The white dot over the head of the cook who looks out the window indicates that this non-playable character would see through Agent 47’s disguise and become suspicious if he saw him.

In social stealth, then, one has to continuously assess the accessibility of various social spheres, find affordances for assimilating to these spheres for the double purpose of survival and continued subversion. This makes Agent 47 an expert in the queer art of passing understood as a “passing into *normative social structures*” for the double purpose of “both conformity and challenge to those structures” (Fuchs 1997, 226; emphasis added). In her analysis of *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959)—a film that is very different in genre, yet resonant in its preoccupation with false identities—Cynthia J. Fuchs writes:

“In passing as a given identity, [...] you must assert a stable, already categorical identity in order to be visible, to be representable; while passing would seem to defy categories, it must adhere to categories as a concept, as well as a means of social and political organization” (227).

This applies to the social stealth in *Hitman*: Recognizable identities are swept up in a process of dissimulation. In each disguise, Agent 47 temporarily assimilates to an exclusionary social group in order to pursue his devious purpose. In light of this, one can observe that—somewhat differently from the ways in which sneaking

stealth queers a game world—social stealth embraces tactical, temporary and selective conformity for the same strategic goal of challenging or subverting a systemic danger. This is not to univocally embrace the divisive practice of passing but, first and foremost, to pragmatically acknowledge the imperceptibility it warrants as a strategy of queer survival even as it disturbingly—and suspensefully in the case of fiction—brings personal safety and existential threat into precarious association.

The fantasy of virtuoso passing, then, is one way in which social stealth allows the player to queerly “make the world your weapon,” as the tagline of *Hitman 2* suggests. This notion of weaponizing the world becomes even clearer in what *Hitman* calls “opportunities” and *Hitman 2* refers to as “mission stories.” Both opportunities and mission stories are series of in-game events that relate to one of the mission targets, usually a person that Agent 47 is tasked to eliminate (but it could also be other kinds of spywork such as a lethal virus that needs to be destroyed). For instance, if the player decides to explore the area around the café in Sapienza, where Agent 47 is tasked with killing the bioengineer Dr. Silvio Caruso, they might overhear a phone conversation of Dr. Oscar Lafayette:

“Dr. Lafayette speaking... Just so. I am outside Villa Caruso now, enjoying a coffee in the sun. Lovely town. So anything I should know about Dr. Caruso before our first session? I was briefed on his anxiety attacks, his gynophobia... Hm, very well. Don't you worry. Caruso is not the first troubled genius I have turned around. [...] I'll have young Silvio calm and serene in no time... And you as well.” (In the video presented as fig. 10, this can be seen around the [two-minute mark](#)).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Agent 47 overhears a phone conversation of Dr. Oscar Lafayette who is about to have a therapy session with Silvio Caruso.



Agent 47 poisons Dr. Lafayette's coffee with the emetic rat poison obtained earlier.



Once Dr. Lafayette drinks the coffee, its 'emetic' effect kicks in and the doctor has to look for a toilet.

If the player chooses to take this opportunity, Agent 47's handler Diana Burnwood will provide a short briefing: This is the first meeting of Lafayette and Caruso, meaning that Caruso and his house staff are unlikely to know what Lafayette looks like. Agent 47 can thus take on Lafayette's identity by putting on his outfit, which allows him to encounter Silvio Caruso in the very private setting of a therapy session. In order to disguise Agent 47 as Dr. Lafayette, the player can choose to pour the rat poison they found earlier into the coffee that Lafayette is 'enjoying in the sun.' Having drunk the poisoned coffee, Lafayette will urgently need a bathroom, a private space where Agent 47 can inconspicuously subdue the therapist and don his clothes. Now Agent 47 can walk into Villa Caruso, where he will be escorted to Caruso's private rooms. Once Caruso himself arrives, he'll lie down on the couch to discuss his mental health problems. The player can make Agent 47 listen to Caruso for a while and then instruct their avatar to smother Caruso to complete the opportunity "Catharsis." This is an example of the kind of opportunity or mission story that gives Agent 47 privileged access to the target.

Other mission stories set a chain of events that leave the target dead without agent 47's direct intervention; these so-called "accidents kills" staged by Agent 47 are a stock feature of the series. What all these chains of events have in common is that they create a complex series of relations through the game world's social space, a movement vector that leads from the immediate surroundings of agent 47—an overheard conversation—to the mission target—Silvio Caruso.^[5] It is important to note that each place in *Hitman* [2016-2021] contains several story missions and that they are oftentimes more complex than the brief example given here might suggest. In *Hitman 2*, four out of the six main destinations have as many as seven story missions. All of these missions have between 2 and 3 targets and the story missions are distributed more or less equally across the targets, with some story missions involving more than one target.

A number of mission stories in each level are mutually exclusive because the same target can obviously not be killed twice in the same playthrough. Once again, the different ways of actualising a target's death are incompatible, which from a commercial perspective must be interpreted as a strategy for creating replay value. From an aesthetic perspective, the existence of various incompatible mission stories supplement *Hitman*'s strong sense of locale with the impression of a thick social network, a social tissue in which people's interests and occupations intersect in complex ways. And some of the threads within that tissue lead directly or indirectly to a node marked as target. More generally, then, it can be observed that the efficacy of social stealth resides in its potential to manipulate and transform the appearance of a social environment—including its normative, exclusionary boundaries—in order to create affordances for free movement.^[6] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) For MacLeod, this aspect of stealth games is what makes them queer:

"They [stealth games] let me cooperate with a situation, ask me to take into account all the moving parts and my role in them. The way men behave in stealth games feels closer to what I hope my own masculinity is: thoughtful, adaptable, aware of myself and my effect on the world around me. Shooter masculinities close off possibilities, make an enemy out of the world; stealth masculinities place me firmly in the world and let me nurture it into something new." (MacLeod)



Agent 47 is about to subdue (or drown) Dr. Lafayette.



After hiding Dr. Lafayette in a (conveniently placed) laundry bin, Agent 47 disguises himself as Lafayette.



Using this disguise, Agent 47 can walk right into Dr. Caruso's estate.



The mansion butler will guide Agent 47 to the room in which the therapy session is to be held.

In light of the above evidence, MacLeod's point can be taken further: Rather than just "cooperate with a situation," stealth gameplay is about generating certain situations in the first place, about bringing situations into being. *Hitman's* richly detailed game world in conjunction with the core mechanic of disguising/passing allows the more recent instalment in the series to simulate a mode of power that intervenes in a given social reality in a way that creatively co-produces how that reality will come to be perceived in the first place. This modus operandi cannot be unequivocally associated with one political camp or another and, rather, should be understood as a generalized mode of how power operates. Massumi articulates this power to modulate how exactly reality comes into being and perception through the concept of *ontopower*:

"Ontopower is not a negative power, a power-over. It is a power-to: a power to incite and orient emergence that insinuates itself into the pores of the world where life is just stirring, on the verge of being what it will become, as yet barely there. It is a positive power for bringing into being (hence the prefix 'onto')." (Massumi 2015, vii-viii)

Ontopower is exercised in the phase of existence that was earlier called bare activity, where a perceptible reality is only just forming—and being onterpowerfully in-, re- and deformed—before it settles into a recognizable 'state' of affairs. As an example, Massumi interrogates the so-called doctrine of preemption, which consists in modulating a population's perception of the future by evoking, say, terrorist threats or economic crises in order to create uncertainty and thereby make the political present more malleable. In this way, the doctrine of preemption gives authorities a broader range of 'creative' interventions, oftentimes with the goal of securitizing and militarizing civil society (Massumi 2015; see Pape 2019a for a study of "preemptive narratives").

The queer gameplay of stealth games is ontopowerful: If *Hitman*, as we saw, confronts the player with a tightly-knit network of social relations that are exclusionary at the beginning of each playthrough, the game subsequently trains the player to perceive the appearance and behavioral movement of various localized authorities and obstacles (like a kitchen assistant or therapist) as tactical resources that can be weaponized and used against the exclusionary environment itself. For that purpose, the social reality does not need to be fully destroyed (e.g. through force-on-force combat as in shooting games). It only needs to be temporarily tweaked or suspended.

Stealth gameplay allows for the suspension of social reality under the condition that this suspension goes unnoticed; it thus creates a double experience in which reality is ontically changed while the experience of that change must be suppressed for others. That makes it possible for a social fiction (or lie) to be collectively produced or at least supported by the very same social group against which that fiction is then deployed. Ultimately, this is how the tagline of *Hitman*—"Make the World Your Weapon"—has to be understood: Stealth is ontopowerful because it allows for one's perception of the world to be weaponized against one's being in the world. The popularity of stealth gameplay—which is increasing if one considers that stealth is becoming a common play style among others in many AAA video games—can and should be understood as a response to and reflection on a political culture in which power is exercised in the phase of bare activity.[7]

Conclusions:
the tactical duplicities of stealth gameplay



Agent 47 listens to Dr. Caruso's troubles before smothering him.

It was said earlier that stealth gameplay articulates an alternative approach to the world. It is now possible to rephrase more specifically that stealth gameplay articulates and participates in a mode of power—ontopower—that is invested in bringing into being perceptions of the world that reorder that world in such a way as to make one's political agenda actionable.[8] For instance, ontopowerful political agendas have affectively lured societies into perceiving and feeling that the available options for political action are fundamentally binary and moral, which has led to the division of many so-called public spheres and stifled the commitment to pragmatic and pluralistic approaches to political organizing (e.g. Remain vs. Leave; pro-immigration vs. anti-immigration; pro-choice vs. pro-life). What consequences does this association with ontopower have for the interpretation of stealth gameplay that the present account is advancing? Is it possible to evaluate stealth gameplay as a practice of queer resistance? Or is it always already complicit with oppressive and violent modes of power? The uncomfortably queer answer is 'both... and...'. Ontopower also suspends—or sidesteps—the law of the excluded middle that makes it possible to provide unequivocal, mutually exclusive answers. This last section of the article explores this tactical duplicity of stealth in more depth.

The previous sections of this article have shown that stealth gameplay can provide queer players with recognition and refuge. Yet, stealth gameplay does not in many cases qualify as an instance of countergaming as described by Alexander Galloway: It neither “replaces play with aesthetics” (2006, 115)—rather, it fuses them—nor does it challenge gameplay conventions through “radical action” (125). Accordingly, stealth does not fit one of Bonnie Ruberg's characterizations of “queer play” as the kind of play that “embraces the powerful act of playing the ‘wrong’ way” either (2019, 18). Stealth gamers usually enact a game's mechanics rather faithfully. This is part of what makes stealth gameplay uncomfortably queer: Its care is not primarily for the dividing lines clearly drawn into a political landscape, nor for the ideals associated with one political orientation or another. Rather, stealth gameplay is utterly pragmatic in that it will take from an oppressive order what it needs to insert its own mode of existence into that order, oftentimes with the aim of dis- or reordering the status quo. It could be said then that stealth proceeds in ways similar to *disidentification* in the sense established by José Muñoz:

“Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure [like identification] nor strictly opposes it [like counter-identification]; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 1999, 11).

Since the present argument is less preoccupied with identity as position than with *processes of individuation* and their *processual effects* (including processes of identification), I tend to rephrase Muñoz's argument in slightly more processual terms: What stands out in the quoted passage is that, from the perspective of the queer political practice of disidentification, movements of adversarial impetus and goals may processually overlap or even mutually include one another. To wit, Muñoz's interpretation of passing largely supports the above interpretation of *Hitman's* use of disguises as an instance of strategic duplicity:

“Passing is often not about bold-faced opposition to a dominant paradigm or a wholesale selling out to that form. Like disidentification itself, passing can be a third modality where a dominant structure is co-opted, worked on and against. The subject who passes can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form.” (Muñoz 1999, 108)

Agent 47 does not identify with the social reality of Sapienza nor does he reject it in an act of counter-identification. Billie Lurk certainly does not identify with her violent surroundings, nor can she afford to openly oppose them. Rather, the players operating these avatars are held to work with an exclusionary social reality and distort it for the sake of survival. Forever nimble, adaptable and flexible, stealthy subjectivity is surely conducive to queer survival. Forever nimble, adaptable and flexible, stealthy subjectivity also articulates an ideal neoconservative (and neoliberal) subjectivity.

Ultimately then, the queerness of stealth gameplay results from the uncomfortable process of individuation-in-between and the *immanent ethics* required to prevent the both/and of strategic duplicity from devolving into the both/and of hypocrisy. Stealth gameplay requires the player to value each of their in-game actions in terms of the ontopowerful effects it bare-actively enables. The ethical question of stealth gameplay is: How will one's play style insert itself into an ongoing process of worlding (as simulated in the complex level design of *Dishonored* and *Hitman*)? Instead of letting us safely interpret their politics or ethics in unequivocal terms from an external viewpoint, stealth games—with their



The impact of the player's ethos on the game world shows most clearly in *Dishonored 2*: If one plays non-lethally and causes "low chaos" in the world, then the (largely innocent) political figures shown here survive.



If one plays non-lethally and causes "low chaos" in the world, the playable character and empress Emily Caldwell becomes known as Emily the Just and Emily the Clever.



If one plays lethally and kills potential allies, then the Empire falls into "high chaos".



If one plays lethally and kills potential allies, the playable character and empress Emily Caldwell

emphasis on the responsiveness of the world, the relative freedom and hence responsibility of the player—can return the question to the player themselves and ask them to value their own actions.

The guiding question regarding one's actions is: What happens next and how to evaluate it? In other words, the overlapping questions crucial for this approach to gameplay are: What are the values I affirm? And: How do I act in such a way that my inflections of the world affirm these values? Raising these questions, stealth gameplay encourages players to conceive an ethos and to enact it. In playing a stealth game like *Dishonored*, this can be as simple as starting a new playthrough with the intention of playing entirely non-lethally: all (simulated) life is valued. Conversely, one may choose to use one's silent blade and arrows at any given opportunity, leaving behind a trail of destruction. After all, it is not uncommon in our contemporary political culture to affirm the values of revenge and retaliation. Or one can simply not give a care about one's impact on the (game) world and see what happens.

The degree of freedom provided by the game's rule system makes players engage with the fictional world as *pharmakoi* whose effects are potentially curative, potentially destructive (see above, footnote 2). However, this concept of the *pharmakon* can now be understood without recourse to the figure of the *homo sacer* as a ritualistic sacrifice. Following the process philosophy of Isabelle Stengers, the concept speaks first and foremost to the "intrinsic instability of certain roles, certain practices" and the ethical "problem" that this "lack of a stable and well determined attribute" poses (2010, 29): What world are you going to bring into existence? Approached in this way, stealth gameplay fosters a practical ethics of worlding in real-time. As such, it can nudge player subjectivity into acknowledging its participation in hegemonic structures and continuously negotiate that relation. The politicality of such a subjectivity does not reside in a particular position, to be mediated and steadfastly held on to in the arena of representational politics, but in its engagement with a complex world and its focus on the immediate effects of that engagement.

Instead of an identifiable position, then, the queer politics of stealth gameplay affirm an immanent outside: an existential excess that can be neither subsumed under an oppressive order, nor excluded from it. A nonconforming creature is always in excess of what the norm allows to be and to be perceived. Rather than embrace antinormativity in an act of open resistance, however, the queer politics of stealth gameplay sidesteps the normative world to affirm its own excess and, through that act, repotentiate a world impoverished by normative being. The fact that the stealthy avatar is always bound to exceed into escape and clandestinity should not be understood as a political weakness. Rather, it marks stealth gameplay's commitment to the "fugitive planning" toward a sociality that remains alien to normative society, even as that society proliferates norms to allow for assimilation and respectability for those whose deviance has become recuperable (Harney and Moten 2013).

This sociality is of an "undercommons," a "nonplace" immanent to the oppressive order (42), that elaborates modes of living that directly value excess, that undeniable queerness at the innermost outside of existence. The queer political ethos of stealth gameplay values first and foremost the world's persistent production of difference, the "general antagonism" of existence (109-110). It

becomes known as Emily the Vengeful.

affirms that value through a mode of life whose aim it is “not to suppress the general antagonism but to experiment with its informal capacity,” to improvise the peaceful integration with other modes of existence. Not in subdued tolerance of hostility. But in persistent, bare-active entanglement with the world and the desire to make more difference that affirms (more) difference. The queer political practice of stealth is duplicitous in yet another sense, then: in its persistence on differentiation, it is open to redouble and overcome itself, at the condition that it may surreptitiously pull that which rejects it into a vortex of change. No permission asked, no recognition required.

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Notes

1. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I have chosen to establish these norms by way of a very succinct consideration of the gameplay in shooting games. Such a sketch is bound to be reductive of this type of game, which sports a vast and heterogeneous catalogue and has given rise to robust fan communities with complex social dynamics (including, it must be said, widespread misogyny and racism). Shooting games differ tremendously in perspective (first or third person), genre (historical fiction, action-adventure, fantasy/science-fiction), and number of players (single or multiplayer), to name only a few criteria by which they can be distinguished. The model of FPS combat that I'm sketching out here is strictly intended to provide the reader with a foil against which the specificity of stealth combat will become clearer; beyond the purposes of this argument, the productivity of the following sketch is questionable. [\[return to page 1\]](#)

2. The Outsider is a crucial figure with complex philosophical implications that cannot fully be unpacked here. One important point must be made by way of an excursus: The Outsider is a *pharmakos*. In her analysis of *Dishonored 2*, Hazel Monforton writes:

“As a sacrificial victim pushed to the margins of society and reviled by the community that rejects him, [the Outsider] assumes the role of the ‘pharmakos’. ‘Pharmakon’ is an Ancient Greek social ritual of catharsis, cleansing, and sacrifice. The victims, ‘pharmakoi’, were required whenever a threat, real or imagined, destabilized the borders and hierarchies of a community to the point of crisis. [...] The pharmakos is therefore granted enormous power by the community: he has the means to both destroy it and save it. It is no accident that the root word, ‘pharma’, means both ‘poison’ and ‘cure’. [...] The Outsider is not a tempter, sowing discord and offering power to bring people away from a righteous or compassionate path. Neither are his machinations meant to trick us into committing acts of chaos for a bored, eldritch boy-god to watch with amused delight. Ultimately, he wants to see power used justly rather than vengefully. Your violence only cements his cynicism; the Void might be chaotic, but the Outsider is not.” (Monforton).

Thus, *Dishonored's* fictional society has abjected the Outsider to the status of *pharmakos* or *homo sacer*, that is, a figure reduced to ‘bare life’ for the purpose of protecting the ‘good life’ (Agamben 1998). The important point, briefly made: Billie Lurk’s project to end the Outsider is also a refusal of a metaphysics that requires the figure of the *homo sacer*, a metaphysics that distinguishes between ‘bare’ and ‘good life’ in the first place. The following section will draw on Brian Massumi’s concept of *bare activity* as an alternative.

3. Garrett is the protagonist of the stealth game *Thief* (2014) as well as previous titles in the same series.

4. This has been a key ability in all *Dishonored* games even though it has different names and animations depending on the character one plays: When playing as Corvo Atano, the ability is called “Blink”. For Emily Kaldwin, the ability is called “Far Reach.” This ability is also central in the stealth game *Aragami* (Lince Works, 2016). [\[return to page 2\]](#)

5. Peter von Matt describes Highsmith’s Ripley novels in a similar way when he speaks of the Ripley as constantly being on the “hellishly hot [hölleheiß] threshold of discovery” (von Matt 2013, 128). Von Matt’s discussion of Max Frisch’s *Gantenbein* establishes a serial structure of repeated moments of discovery of the protagonist’s secret. These moments of *anagnorisis* are then taken back to allow for continued attempts at staying undetected, which creates a serial process of fail-and-retry which is not unlike the repetition of trial-and-error in much (stealth) gameplay.

6. For reasons of argument and succinctness, the previous section did not fully address how *Dishonored* similarly creates such a complex world. This can now be briefly indicated: *Dishonored* simulates a complex, relational world not so much through social relations but through the design of highly dynamic spaces or, rather, spacetimes. The clearest examples of this can be found in *Dishonored 2*: One mission is set in the “Clockwork Mansion” of a megalomaniac genius inventor. At the pull of various levers, this mansion mechanically reorganizes its walls and floors, modulating the player’s possibilities for movement at all times ([see here](#) for a demonstration; transformation of the Clockwork Mansion at 2:35, 5:40 and 12:25). Another mission requires the player to move through the mansion of the above-mentioned Aramis Stilton at two different moments in time simultaneously, thus sliding two very different versions of the same gamespace into one another. As [this Making Of](#) and commentary on the design of this level suggests, the time travel conceit is also a mise-en-abyme of the practice of saving-and-reloading, which is crucial to stealth gameplay. [\[return to page 3\]](#)

7. At this point, it could be argued that stealth gameplay *exposes* the workings of a political culture invested in ontopower. Following Judith Butler’s interpretation of Nella Larsson’s *Passing*, one could interpret such exposure as a practice of queering:

“As a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed, ‘queering’ works as the exposure within language—an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language—of both sexuality and race. [...] In [this] instance, queering is what upsets and exposes passing [...]” (Butler 130-131).

The present argument does not pursue this hypothesis because it leads to what Sedgwick has described as a paranoid reading (Sedgwick 2003, 123-151, see esp. 139). Both paranoid and reparative readings of stealth gameplay are possible—and that might be the more crucial point: Stealth gameplay sidesteps the alternative and affirms its tactical duplicity.

8. In his study of subterfuge in Western literature, Peter von Matt sketches a related but different relation between different modes of power based on one of the first literary masters of stealth, Odysseus, and his force-on-force counterpart Achilles. Perhaps the Trojan horse, thought up by Odysseus, can qualify as an early, singular example of ontopower.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



In the 1990s and 2000s, trans children appeared on television in talk shows and news specials, like this episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, "Born in the Wrong Body."



Time announced the "transgender tipping point" in 2014.

Queer stabilization of gender and queer regulation of sexuality in *I Am Jazz*

by [Mary Zaborskis](#)

In the contemporary United States, I argue that trans children are represented on television in queer ways [1]. [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Queerness does not manifest itself in representations of trans children's non-normative sexual desires or the very fact of their gender identities. Rather, queerness emerges in vehement assertions of the stability of trans children's gender identity *as well as* in an explicit hyperfocus on trans children's sexuality. These assertions of gender stability coupled with candid sexual preoccupation ultimately serve to appease audience anxieties regarding trans children's existence, perceived as inherently dangerous. Trans children's queerness on television reifies their status as objects belonging primarily to the public, extricates them from the normative category of childhood, and ultimately restricts the gendered and sexual presents and futures they can inhabit. Queerness marks the denial of trans children's privacy, self-possession, and exploration. In saying this, I am not suggesting that privacy, self-possession, and exploration are automatically granted features of childhood or equally accessible to all children in all contexts. Rather, I point out that there are features unique to trans childhood that ensure such rights and privileges will be unavailable to trans children on television.

Non-trans children experience policing of gender and sexual identity, but I argue that policing occurs in ways specific to trans children and are enabled by the medium of television. Media's attention to the needing-to-be-stabilized sexuality of trans children stands in opposition to treatment of non-trans children who are permitted gender play and exploration in ways that trans children are not. And non-trans children's sexualities are often a present-absence at the heart of media as a source of anxiety that is addressed in aslant, implicit, and coded ways. In addition, trans children have to adhere to restrictive scripts for gender identity that assert stasis and solidity in ways counter to modern childhood's ostensible defining features of open, amorphous, unformed identity. Furthermore, such utopian features masquerade as universal to childhood but in fact are differentially available depending on a child's race, class, ability, sexuality, and, as I will focus on in this essay, gender identity.

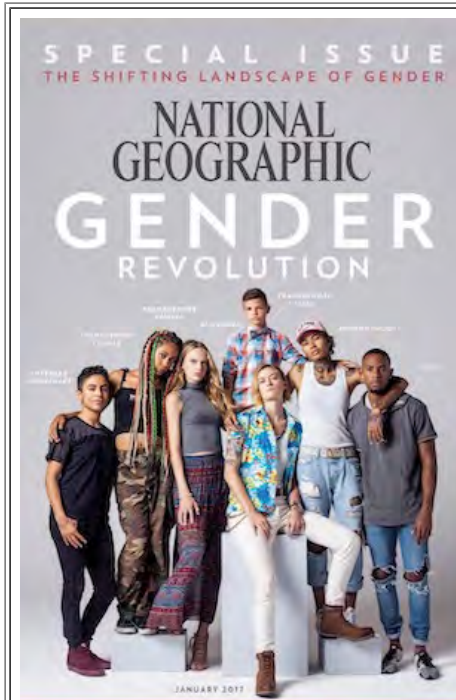
Trans children are represented on television in these ways precisely because of their supposed novelty. While Jules Gill-Peterson reminds us in *Histories of the Transgender Child* that there is nothing "fundamentally new" (viii) about trans children, a cultural narrative about their newness persists, in part, because of how the media frames their very existence. Trans children are offered to audiences as pedagogical objects; the media produces audience desire regarding trans children (to know them, understand them, have them explain themselves) through its framing of these children. The "didactic" work surrounding the depiction of trans children is then oriented toward responding to mainstream audiences' imagined,



Part of the “transgender tipping point” was increased media representation of trans people, like the casting of trans actress Laverne Cox in *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019).

voyeuristic questions and concerns (questions and concerns that are implanted and normalized via the representations):

- What bathrooms do these children use?
- What do their genitalia look like now?
- What will their genitalia look like in the future?
- What do their classmates think of their genitalia?
- How will they have sex?
- What is their orientation if they haven’t sought medical intervention?
- How do these children *really* know what they want, now or in the future?



In January 2017, *National Geographic* published a special “Gender Revolution” issue, largely focused on children. The newsstand issue featured gender non-conforming and trans youth on the cover.



The *National Geographic* cover available to subscribers featured Avery, a 9-year-old transgender girl. The cover was controversial, eliciting “concern” and “horror” from some of the readership.

The media require that trans children account for themselves in ways no one else—child or adult—has to, and a prescribed media structure demands these children’s intellectual and emotional labor if they appear on TV. In contrast, in terms of government regulation, an adult on TV speculating explicitly about a child’s genitalia would almost always be condemned a violation, but in the case of trans children, it’s permitted because the adult’s probing curiosity—one that often betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of relations between gender and sexuality—becomes valued above the child’s privacy and protection. The very fact of children’s trans identities voids their claims to either “right.” Television representations purport to *help* trans children by ostensibly making such issues more knowable to mainstream audiences, but these representations actually assist in *restricting* trans modes of existence, especially in childhood. On TV, trans children’s gender identities must be constantly asserted as static, and trans children’s present and future sexualities are allowed to be a public, explicitly addressed concern.



The innocence culturally ascribed to childhood is racialized as white and isn't disrupted by heterosexuality.



Caitlyn Jenner appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in June 2015 and

The public monitoring of trans children's sexuality is accompanied by a language of care, concern, and hope for trans children's future happiness. In terms of television, this supervision operates to address a mainstream audience's anxieties and curiosities over trans children's interior *and* exterior experiences of identity and desire. Since current representations of trans children on television are queer, this queerness is part of a larger cultural project that justifies violation of, surveillance over, and scrutiny into trans children's bodies, identities, and desires. Queer features of represented trans childhood includes the hyperstabilization of gender and the frank discussions of their present and future sexualities. Such queerness does not liberate trans children, but rather it participates in objectification and othering under the guise of inclusivity and progress.

To explore the effects of these queer features of trans childhood, I consider in this essay one of the most mainstream representations of trans children on television today: TLC's reality show *I Am Jazz* (2015-present). *I Am Jazz* demonstrates how television can both make visible *and* compound the queer features of trans childhood and thus enable trans children's exploitation. In particular, such shows respond to an entertainment pressure to allow sexuality to be available for public display and does so here in ways that contradict U.S. cultural ideals regarding childhood. *I Am Jazz*'s seriality, participation in the genre conventions of reality television, and framing as family-friendly television present Jazz's sexuality as a problem to be resolved across time, via repeating romantic arcs, and by the adults around her, in conjunction with what is framed as the stabilization of her gender through medical interventions. When the queer features of trans childhood look like normativity, this is precisely what enables their televisual production: here, the façade of family friendly television obscures the gender and sexual restrictions and inquiries to which Jazz is subject.

Through an analysis of *I Am Jazz*, I invite us to think about how the media's figuration of Jazz works to impose a coherent, legible, sexual and gender narrative upon Jazz *alongside* Jazz's own self-declarations that disrupt and refute that neat narrative. I will pay particular attention to the first season of the show to consider the expectations and groundwork the show lays in regard to Jazz's gender identity and sexual desires. I will then consider this season in relation to the rest of the series, which follows Jazz's dating life and gender confirmation surgery in acute detail.

The representation of Jazz in the series sets up the stability of Jazz's gender identity in order to address potential audience anxieties over Jazz's sexual development. To address these anxieties, the series addresses Jazz's sexuality in ways that are both candid and voyeuristic. Children's sexuality *does* exist, and I am not suggesting that there is an inherent problem in representing children's sexuality on screen. Rather, I consider how and why the show addresses and frames Jazz's sexuality in practical, logistical, and clinical terms, *especially in relation to her gendered body*, in ways that other children's sexuality is not.

Parents, grandparents, and doctors are shown talking to each other about a teenage girl's ability to orgasm or not, the location of her clitoris, and how frequently she is masturbating. In fact, our cultural norms all but prohibit such



.... three weeks later in July 2015, *I Am Jazz* premiered on TLC!



Jazz's mom Jeanette describes Jazz as "immodest" in a support group for parents of trans children before going into detail about the challenges doctors are experiencing because of Jazz's particular body.

conversation. (Of course, this taboo is paradoxical when we consider how much teenage girls are trained to experience their bodies and sexualities as not belonging to them in the public sphere—evidenced in quotidian forms like dress codes, cat calling, and photo leaking.) However, in this show, these topics come up as a matter of fact and occur frequently in conversations with and about the teenage Jazz in the later seasons of the show. Across the show's trajectory, we are asked to question if Jazz's ability to inhabit the category of woman as properly heterosexual will be "complete," to use a word echoed across the series. We wonder what assurances of such completion will be provided. The family friendly features of the reality TV docudrama veil the televisual violations and excessive examination of Jazz's body and desires.



Jeanette describes the location of Jazz's clitoris over lunch.



During a Facebook Live event, a stranger matter-of-factly asks teenage Jazz how long she has to wait to have sex after gender confirmation surgery.



The first episode of the series begins behind the scenes, with a producer calling for Jazz.



Before Jazz begins the interview that will introduce her, viewers experience an invasive moment of watching Jazz adjust her top.

These aspects of the show's narrative trajectory respond to adults' and audience's desires for Jazz's identity, sexuality, and future. This figuration of Jazz competes with the living, actual Jazz who tries to assert her subjectivity and desires. And her desires and personal views of identity aren't just mediated but often ignored and abandoned by the show's narrative impulse. In the first season, adults refuse to acknowledge or fully incorporate Jazz's assertions. Jazz's desires don't get edited out of the series, so we cannot say they're erased, but they're unevenly apprehended, so if what she says affirms adults' desires, those ideas get absorbed while Jazz's statements that are unassimilable exist as excess to the show's narrative trajectory. The unassimilability of Jazz's desires, however, become even more assimilated as the series progresses. Jazz's desires and disruptions to the coherency imposed upon and desired for her then become framed as problems to resolve through gender confirmation surgery. In what follows, I will consider the queer features of *I Am Jazz* that emerge in relation to Jazz's gender identity and sexual desires in the first season alongside these moments of disruption, and then

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consider them in relation to the future that gets constructed for Jazz in the following seasons.

What is normative about *I Am Jazz*?



Jazz's parents affirm the normativity of their family in the series opening: "We are very typical with an extraordinary circumstance because we have a daughter that is transgender."

I Am Jazz is a TLC reality show that features the daily happenings, social life, and medical experiences of Jazz Jennings, a transgender youth and activist. The show began following Jazz starting at the age of 14 and has now aired for six seasons. The sixth season finished airing in March 2020, right at the start of the pandemic, and a seventh season has not yet been announced. Season 1 introduces us to Jazz; season 2 features the beginning of the conversation about Jazz's gender confirmation surgery; seasons 3 and 4 track Jazz's consultations and preparation for gender confirmation surgery; season 5 features her gender confirmation surgery; and season 6 follows Jazz in the aftermath of her surgery. Each season features 8 episodes, with the exception of season 1, which has 10, and season 5, which has 12. Season 1 episodes aired for 30 minutes each (except for the premiere and finale), while the remaining seasons aired for one hour. Woven throughout the seasons are regular discussions of Jazz's mental health, dating, and desires, where an almost entirely predictable pattern for the drama of Jazz's romantic life as a trans girl emerges. She laments not being able to find anyone interested in her because of her trans identity throughout the season and encounters a romantic interest in episode 6 or so. The final episodes of that season feature Jazz's anxiety over dating and then a successful date that enables the season finale to end on a note of hope and relief regarding Jazz's sexual future.

Like other programs in the reality television show genre, and especially the subgenre of the docusoap, *I Am Jazz* resolves the tension around the subject's perceived non-normalcy by reinforcing aspects of her normalcy throughout the series. Jazz is a transgender girl, but she also plays soccer, hangs out with her friends, and wants to date. The program could be what [Karen Tongson](#) calls "[normporn](#)," a show that on the surface appears to have queer content but is actually deeply invested in portraying a world that is "post-queer, post-racial . . .



Karen Tongson also remarks that *Transparent* (2013-2019), an Amazon series featuring Jeffrey Tambor playing a trans woman who comes out late in life, as “a worthy normporn candidate.”

[and] that sanctions our reinvestment in the (usually bourgeois) dramas of everyday life.” Media scholar Joanna McIntyre notes that docusoaps “make a spectacle of trans subjectivities while simultaneously ‘normalising’ them and perpetuating transnormativity.” It’s a move that seems to have an “affirmative and progressive impetus” but is “ultimately assimilationist” (10).



A sampling of the TLC catalogue demonstrates how this network circulates copious amounts of “normporn.”

Moreover, *Jazz* represents a particular trans child, not all trans children. The show focuses on Jazz as a girl who started to socially transition at the age of five and who is part of a generation of kids accessing hormone blockers and cross-sex hormone therapy at a young age in a somewhat institutionalized (but not yet fully standardized) manner. This focus has led some trans scholars and critics to express concerns over the show’s ostensible *transnormativity*. McIntyre defines transnormativity as

“a regulatory model of transgender being that assumes and prioritizes certain trans experiences, representations, and behaviours. . . [it] grants legibility and legitimacy to otherwise marginalized folks . . . [but] establishes a hierarchy in which modes of gender alterity are diminished, obscured, and/or subordinated” (11).

In other words, the representation of Jazz functions to singularize the trans experience, sanctioning one pathway for trans existence that gets apprehended as universal.

This function is captured in the show: Jazz has trans friends who speak candidly about the fact that because they socially transitioned after puberty that they have a harder time navigating the world than Jazz. Early in the series, their inclusion in the show provides an important corrective to anyone who might apprehend Jazz’s story as universal. These are trans girls of different races and socioeconomic status from Jazz, with differential access to healthcare and capital. The show’s including a diversity of experiences, however, narrows across the series, which indicates that all these friends desire and will indeed follow the same path as Jazz. Thus, in Season 5, Jazz has a sleepover with three of her trans friends and asks,



The E! Network also provided us some “normporn” when it aired two seasons of *I Am Cait* (2015-2016), which premiered a few weeks after *I Am Jazz*.



As *I Am Jazz* progresses, we are introduced to some of Jazz's trans friends, who represent trans experiences that differ from Jazz's experiences.



In season 5, Jazz asks her friends if they all plan to get gender confirmation surgery. She is excited for them to "join the vagina club."



In season 2, Jazz gives a speech as a youth ambassador for the Human Rights Campaign, a role that captures her iconicity.

"Is everyone here going to get the surgery?" Everyone replies with their plans—scheduled consultations and medical appointments are already underway—and Jazz says, "I can't wait until you guys join the vagina club." This friend group is close, and given that they're sharing doctors, information, and experiences, the fact that Jazz asks them if they're getting the surgery functions as a performative gesture for the audience: of course, she would already know. It actually isn't a question for this group, and the multiple ways to be trans are constantly being limited and literally edited out across the series. That Jazz "can't wait" for her friends to "join the vagina club" suggests she is inhabiting a particular mode of trans identity that the others haven't reached yet but will once they seek the same medical interventions that she has.

I describe this bit of dialogue not to condemn Jazz or her friends for seeking medical interventions, but to notice how the television series frames that surgery as an expected step on a journey with pre-determined, requisite milestones. It is a framing in the service of sanctioning certain modes of trans existence over others. Tey Meadow observes the vexed position of trans children, noting that while medical interventions and technologies "offer relief to many children . . . [they] simultaneously exert their own normalizing pressures to order, taxonomize, and measure gender transgressions." In other words, some trans children's efforts to survive and exist open these children up to being critiqued in terms of forces and structures beyond them. The children are critiqued for promoting gender norms and for accessing medical technologies that help them survive—a critique their non-trans peers don't proportionally encounter. In other words, many children inhabit gender norms, but trans children's inhabiting of gender norms is burdened with meaning: these children are criticized as responsible for the "normalizing pressures" some trans people are subject to. This burden is inappropriately placed on trans children instead of the gatekeeping structures that subject trans people to "normalizing pressure."

Jazz, in particular, is also burdened with class, race, and generational ideals. [Rebekah Sheldon and Jean-Thomas Tremblay](#) have remarked how, in *I am Jazz*, Jazz is

"a powerful emblem of futurity, the iconic white, middle-class trans child of contemporary figurations [who] laminates racial innocence onto the history of deeply coercive and violent exploitation of children's bodies."

Jazz is representable—able to be an "emblem" and "icon"—on television because she inhabits other categories of privilege (though I would suggest that her Jewishness is an underexplored feature of her identity that complicates the dismissal of Jazz as categorically white). Because of the dearth of representations of trans children, the ways that Jazz's singular experience gets taken up and framed *by others* as universal often coincides with criticism against her.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

This essay is not a critique of the individual Jazz or her family, but rather an examination of the structures that facilitate someone like Jazz being imagined in a certain fashion. It's a palatable depiction that seems representative of the trans youth experience, addressed to an audience largely unfamiliar with and even vehemently opposed to trans persons, experiences, and existence. In this way, *I Am Jazz* is what [Gill-Peterson might call](#) "a bad trans object of cis culture." Jazz is permitted conditional entry into the category of human for a presumed cisgender audience. Her narrative of having "a girl brain and a boy body" has permitted her (always fraught and difficult) access to medical interventions that work to bring her gender identity and body into mainstream, culturally sanctioned alignment.



Jazz first came out on television as trans in 2007, when 20/20 aired an interview between Barbara Walters and Jazz's family.



Jazz's childhood explanation that she has "a girl brain and a boy body" is a clip that has aired as part of the opening credits for *I Am Jazz*.

The conventions of the reality television docudrama promote this entry. Jazz comes from a traditional, well off, nuclear family—two heterosexual parents, older twin brothers, an older sister, and a set of grandparents who are fixtures in her life. Her trans identity is presented in the context of white middle-class norms, values, and family-oriented plot points. Situating Jazz in the "normporn" world of such a family drama augments her palatability to an audience that might otherwise protest her existence. The melodrama of the white heterosexual family unit secures Jazz's representability.

Interestingly, the representation of Jazz in the series diverges from typical representations of trans youth sexuality, where discusses of their sexuality are largely absent. Trans children often must affirm what Nat Hurley and Steven Bruhm articulate as the

"dominant narrative about children: children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions. At the same time, however, children are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual" (ix).

In *The Queer Child*, Kathryn Bond Stockton notes how when it comes to trans children in the media, there is "strikingly, decisively, no mention . . . made of object choice, attraction, or sexuality in reference to these children, not even for the teens. And this, perhaps—this absence of any sexual conceptions—is why" (8) they *can* be represented. In other words, before *I Am Jazz*, the representable trans child was a child sanitized of sexuality. Sexuality might be a feature of adolescence that can, at times and under certain conditions, be represented, but



The melodrama of white upper-middle class life in suburban Florida is alive and well in *I Am Jazz*.



Four years before *I Am Jazz*, the Oprah Winfrey Network aired the documentary *I Am Jazz: A Family in Transition* (2011).



Dancing Queen (2018), a Netflix reality show featuring Justin Johnson's dance studio (Justin is also known as drag queen Alyssa Edwards of *RuPaul's Drag Race* fame), explores the campiness of children's gender play.

sexuality in relation to trans children is apprehended as an ontological threat. The trans child cannot be sexual without risking losing the already precarious validity of their gender from the social milieu and its institutions. Picking up on Stockton, in a discussion of an OWN Network special on Jazz and her family—the precursor to the TLC series—that aired in 2011, Gabrielle Owen asks, “Is the trans child a queer child?” (96). Owen, in part, responds by saying the more apt question is “not whether the trans child is queer in essence, but rather where and how the trans child is allowed to emerge as queer” (98).

Elsewhere. I have argued that the most queer television programs airing in our contemporary moment are reality shows featuring children. In this genre—which ranges from docusoaps to competition shows—we encounter slews of children exploring and defying gender norms and discipline. Exploring gender is never the premise of these shows, but it is inextricable from the cultural landscape in which these shows operate. The conventions of television also ensure the representation of this gender exploration, particularly on reality television; the confessional mode often operates to augment the humor of child participants, frequently juxtaposing children’s self-descriptions against adults’ contradictory claims, a framing that often reminds us of adult projections onto children. From boys vs. girls challenges on cooking competitions to inventing romantic tension between boy and girl partners in a dance number, gendered scripts circulate within and determine the drama that these shows manufacture. Children often reject or comment on the gendered norms being imposed on them, and relations between the disciplining of children’s genders and the failure of that discipline makes for campy television. Reality television creates space for many children to explore gender; indeed, it’s almost a genre mandate.

What’s different—and differently queer—about *I Am Jazz* is that Jazz’s gender isn’t disciplined on the show—it’s her sexuality that’s explicitly disciplined. Her gender doesn’t have to be disciplined because it’s necessarily asserted as a static, non-negotiable fact. Her gender confirmation is framed as something that will deepen and “complete” her identity, but the stability of her gender is a given—Jazz progresses but the experience of her gender identity remains fixed. I don’t want to suggest that Jazz’s gender *isn’t* stable in the ways she asserts, but rather to emphasize that this assertion is a requirement for Jazz’s representability *and* for her to get validated in medical, legal, and cultural spheres. The space for exploration afforded to children elsewhere in reality television shows isn’t permitted to Jazz—and *that* is quite queer. Asserting the stability of Jazz’s identity coupled with explicitly discussing her sexuality reverses the usual pattern we see with children’s representation on television, which relies on exploration of gender but silence around childhood sexuality. It also distinguishes Jazz from other representations of trans youth that erased their sexuality entirely.

As a trans child, Jazz must adhere to gender norms more strictly than other children in order for her identity to be considered valid by audiences and gatekeepers of trans futurity—doctors, policy makers, and other authority figures. This adherence is exceptional to trans children—non-trans children are not required to assert the stability of their identity in the rigorous and epistemically violent ways that trans children are. The show’s figuration of Jazz works to assure audiences that her sexuality is going to properly align with her gender; indeed, that is the anxiety that the show works to domesticate across six seasons. Owen argues,



In the first season's opening credits, Jazz's brothers repeat: "She's a girl. She's a girl. She's a girl," a statement asserted countless times across the series (in part because Jazz and her family have to frequently confront transphobic people who try to deny Jazz's identity).



The opening credits sequence across the series captures this progression of Jazz's journey alongside her gender stability. Credit sequences for seasons 2, 3, and 4 use an almost identical voice over, changing the number in the opening line to match Jazz's age: "[Jazz's age] years ago, I was assigned male at birth. But inside, I always knew I was a girl." The sequence then cuts to the clip where Jazz says, "I have a girl brain in a boy body."



Jazz continues in the sequence in a voiceover: "Being transgender hasn't been easy." The sequence then includes different moments from the currently airing season. Each season's sequence features a medical appointment. In this season 2 sequence, a doctor comments on Jazz's breast development. The voiceover then concludes: "But it's made me who I am. I am

"When it comes to identity, childhood and adulthood are ideologically interdependent oppositions: childhood is conceptualized as open and unformed so that adulthood can manufacture an arrival at stable identity. This dynamic is what queers all children (according to Stockton) and also what allows children to inhabit queerness without appearing non-normative" (103).

Yet this mode of "queerness" for "all children"—the "open[ness]" and "unformed[ness]" of identity—is vehemently denied to Jazz. Her gender identity and the inhabiting of that identity have to be presented as static, solid, and already arrived in order for her to a) continue to access the medical interventions she seeks for her gender and b) to normalize her for a mainstream audience. The fixity of Jazz's gender—and its work to help fix Jazz's sexuality—is also what permits the show to continue to stay on the air. The narrative stabilization of Jazz's gender enables her to be represented in ways that have the potential to be assimilated into mainstream understandings of gender as static across one's lifetime.

The fixity of Jazz's gender is reinforced by her access to medical interventions. Medical interventions are accessible because of this gender fixity and help to strengthen it. Such a fixity, coupled with Jazz's public facing trans narrative on *I Am Jazz*, constructs what Kadji Amin might call

"an organized, progressivist temporality that joins both continuity and change as a form of what queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman has termed 'chrononormativity,' a social patterning of experiences of time in conformity with normative frameworks" (220).

Amin says that trans narratives in the media, such as TV talk shows and in the press, seemingly

"implant . . . normative narratives of sexed development, continuity, and coherence. To say that transsexual autobiography is chrononormative is not necessarily to say that it is bad but rather to illuminate the ways in which it produces an experience of healing and empowerment for certain trans subjectivities and one of fragmentation and invalidation for others. Attending to the vagaries of transgender and transsexual experience, on the other hand, may necessitate a recognition of what some theorists have described as a 'queer'—that is, nonchronological and nonnormative—form of temporality" (220).

Here, Amin is saying that divergences from the dominant trans narrative in the media and elsewhere might be read as forms of queer temporality that defy the chrononormative. I want to claim that even when we are discussing the trans child accessing medical intervention that seemingly contributes to this progressive, teleological model of gender development and stability, that is still queer because it requires a temporal securing of gender that is out of sync with other modes of childhood. Trans childhood, then, may enact a kind of queer temporality, which can be captured in the seemingly low stakes world of the docusoap.

Regulating sexuality in season 1 of *I Am Jazz*

The first season of *I Am Jazz* features many unassimilable moments of Jazz's assertion of potential sexual non-normativity. Jazz frequently questions her

Jazz."

sexuality, but these moments don't get apprehended or reinforced in the trajectory of a non-threatening narrative of Jazz's asexuality and/or heterosexuality. The show toggles between wanting to provide space for Jazz's questioning of her sexuality while also still affirming heterosexuality as the likely default that she will inhabit. I am interested in moments of unassimilability in the face of the narrative impulse toward her heterosexuality. I follow them as what Pete Coviello might name as the "any number of broken-off, uncreated futures, futures that would not come to be" (20). The first season does not make an effort to assimilate these moments into the telos of normative sexual development and narrative of gender transformation. In contrast, I consider what these moments mean for the seemingly transnormative subject and how they interplay with the queer features of Jazz's trans childhood: gender fixity and explicit sexual preoccupation.

Before the show works to represent and discipline Jazz's sexuality, it first establishes the stability and fixity of Jazz's gender identity. The first episode, "I Am Jazz," introduces us to 14-year-old Jazz and her family—parents Greg and Jeannette and siblings Ari, Sander, and Griffin. Jazz's gender transition from boy to girl is firmly asserted as an event of the past. Her medical transition, which is explored across the series, is ongoing, but she socially transitioned from boy to girl, and that aspect of her transition is complete and reflects her stable, unwavering gender identity. The family instead speaks of Jazz's current gender shifts in terms of temporality. While the camera cuts from one environment of domesticity to another—the family dinner table to the domicile (where the confessionals take place)—Jazz's mother Jeannette explains, "As she's transitioned from a young girl into a young lady . . . I really don't know what to expect and I'm nervous." Jazz's "transition" now is linear and progressive—she will move from "girl" to "lady" at the pace dictated by proper gender development. "Lady" connotes that part of this proper development will be properly sexual, racialized, and classed—she will appropriately occupy the category of upper middle class white woman. "Girl" has been a time of presumed and culturally desired asexuality, and "lady" will be a time of racialized bourgeois heterosexual desire.



The first episode feels similar to the one-hour specials that featured Jazz in her early life – it includes many montages and clips of Jazz as a child, offered as evidence that her gender identity has been consistent for as long as she could express herself.

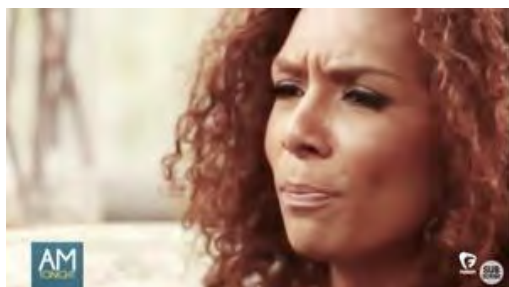


Jazz's parents' confessional takes place in this domestic space with family photos in the background. Here, Jeannette discusses Jazz's shift from a "young girl" to a "young lady."



Jeanette describes her parents' interest in Jazz's medical appointment as something expressed in a "loving nosy way."

The show presents the medical interventions that are part of Jazz's particular gender transition as facilitating her proper sexual development. In the first episode, Jeannette visits her parents without Jazz, and they discuss the "medical component" of Jazz's gender transition. While Jeannette acknowledges that Jazz is a "little behind her friends"—suggesting a temporal lag to her gender development—she quickly asserts that the estrogen and puberty blockers are contributing to Jazz "developing nicely like a young lady." The show acknowledges potential anxieties about Jazz's gender asynchronicity—which could yield sexual



Janet Mock “flipped the script” to demonstrate how the media approaches trans people in invasive ways.

non-normativity—and then dismisses these anxieties by asserting that Jazz’s gender and sexual development is that of a “young lady.” Notably, this discussion about the anxieties regarding the temporality and outcomes of Jazz’s development happens in the absence of Jazz. Adults, including strangers, regularly discuss Jazz’s gender, sexuality, and body in her absence, modeling a public possession over Jazz that then justifies audience voyeurism—the (il)logic is that these strangers are just wondering and saying aloud what everyone wants to know. [Janet Mock has discussed the way](#) that trans people are subject to excessive scrutiny and violation in the public sphere under the guise of “bridging an understanding gap” between the trans person and the presumed non-trans audience, who are, through this, positioned as the authorizing force in regard to trans identity.



Jazz shows her friends her “tampon chapstick” at their sleepover, then she explains how she has to remind her friends she doesn’t menstruate.



Jazz’s friends discuss their breast development.



Jazz explains how her preoccupation with breast size maps onto larger concerns about fitting in with her peers.

Jazz discusses her bodily insecurities throughout the show, and while she asserts firmly that these insecurities are tied to her gender dysphoria, her family re-narrates her insecurities as bound with heterosexual desire. While at a sleepover, the camera cuts between Jazz socializing with her friends to Jazz in her confessional describing what it’s like, as a transgender girl, to bond with other girls over physical development anxieties. Jazz says that her desire to develop breasts and a nice figure is about both feeling and being recognized as the girl that she is: “For me, it’s mostly about fitting in and being another girl” so that she can “look like a girl to everyone else.” She then states that this desire, “for other girls . . . [i]s mostly about boys.” While perhaps an oversimplification of the whole range of complicated desires and pressures that emerge in relation to non-trans girls going through puberty, Jazz feels this distinction is important. She wants to assert that her desire for her body to look different is about her *gendered* desires and not about her sexual desires.

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Jazz is worried that other girls at the beach will have the “perfect beach body” while she doesn’t.

Jazz’s brothers, Sander and Griffin, nonetheless elide Jazz’s gendered desires with sexuality. On a trip to the beach, Jazz sits behind her brothers in the car and laments to them about her bodily insecurities. Her brothers surround her in the shot, and they dismiss her anxieties. This framing foregrounds masculine energy and dominance and minimizes Jazz’s concerns as silly teenage girl worries that have to do with being overly concerned with boys. The scene cuts to Jazz’s brothers in a confessional, immediately connecting Jazz’s insecurities with her ability to be involved romantically with men in the future. They go from discussing Jazz’s concerns to discussing all teen girls’ concerns: “Most girls are just like, ‘Oh, I don’t have any boobs, no guys are gonna like me.’” The camera cuts back to the car, and the brothers tell Jazz that personality matters more to a guy than any one body part. The camera cuts to the boys back on the couch explaining that “guys kind of shy away from [Jazz] because she is transgender.” Jazz’s concerns about her body are apprehended, asserted, and presented as anxieties over not being desirable to the opposite sex, despite Jazz’s attempts to explain otherwise.



Jazz’s brothers tell Jazz that her feelings are like “most girls.”



Jazz’s brothers mimic teenage girls, saying they all whine over how their “friends have bigger boobs than me.”



Jazz describes herself as the “seventh wheel” since everyone else at the beach is coupled up.



Jazz asks her sister if she’s hooked up with her new love interest. Jazz’s sister remarks on how “inquisitive” Jazz is about her love life.

In this episode and other early episodes in the season, Jazz identifies as being “boy crazy,” and when discussing romantic possibilities in the future, she and others imagine her paired with a boy. The seventh episode of the season, entitled “I’m Ready to Explore Boys,” appears to reinforce this heterosexual narrative, but it’s in this episode that Jazz’s unassimilable desires are most evident. The episode opens with Jazz at the beach with her siblings. She talks with her sister, Ari, and says,

“All of my friends are starting to, you know, like, do their thing with



Jazz explains how she is still “exploring [her] sexuality” to her sister.



guys, and everyone is in that age right now, and I’m still, like, exploring my sexuality. I don’t even know who I’m attracted to.”

Jazz describes herself as being out of sync with her friends—they’re “in that age right now,” but she sees herself as in another time because she’s still “exploring her sexuality.” She isn’t at the time to “do [her] thing with guys now” because she doesn’t know if her sexual object choice will be a guy.

The camera cuts to Jazz speaking in a confessional, and she explains further:

“Although I do have some physical attraction to boys, I haven’t had a crush for, like, two years, so I can’t definitively say that I’m attracted to boys, because I think I might be, but you know, maybe girls are on the spectrum, too; I—I don’t know.”

When Jazz says “to boys,” she holds her hand up to her mouth and whispers “to boys,” performing a highly stylized gesture that signifies how she is embedded in the heterosexual landscape—she has been properly trained to keep her desires, as a girl and lady-in-training, minimal, while also acknowledging that they exist for the proper object.

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| Jazz whispers that she’s attracted “to boys,” holding her hand up to her mouth for emphasis. She understands how to perform proper sexual desire, despite still “exploring.” | When Jazz tries to articulate how she might be attracted to girls, she gets flustered, closes her eyes, throws her hands up in the air, and says, “I—I don’t know.” |

However, she is not completely disciplined by this imposed narrative—she isn’t willing to say that she is “definitively” attracted to one sex or the other. She gets exasperated by the time she says, “I don’t know,” throwing her hands up and speaking in a different register and with less fluency (“I—I don’t know”). Juxtaposing the performative gesture of the whispered “to boys” with the more unrestrained and riled “I—I don’t know” suggests that Jazz *feels* the pressure of the heterosexual mandate being imposed on her, while she is also trying to carve out space for exploring her sexuality on her own terms, unbound from expectations for what her sexual future and the orientation of her desires should be.

As the episode continues, the vexed relation between desires for Jazz to be heterosexual and Jazz’s resistance to declaring herself one way or another continues. Jazz meets up with her friends and announces, “I’m ready to explore boys!”

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Jazz braces her friends for some “new news.”



Jazz announces to her friends that she is “ready to explore boys.”

She then qualifies this statement with, “But I’m still exploring my sexuality, like, I don’t know which one I go to.” The title of the episode is drawn from this conversation—“I Am Ready to Explore Boys.” This title erases non-heterosexual possibilities for Jazz. Despite her consistent claim that she has to explore in order know to whom she is attracted, the framing of the episode participates in the larger framing of this season (and ultimately, the series). The show asserts Jazz as a proper heterosexual subject in a way that occludes the discipline that goes into making this a fact versus an orientation that Jazz comes into.

Later in the episode, Jeannette takes Jazz to a transgender support group so that Jazz can discuss some of her concerns regarding sexuality and dating. The conversation in the group illustrates how desires for heterosexual futures for trans youth exist even within the trans community. This isn’t to criticize trans adults or their desires for trans futures, but rather to note how the show presents the normalizing impulse of Jazz’s sexual desires.



Jazz reminds her friends that she’s still “exploring her sexuality,” then jokes that they should “watch out.”

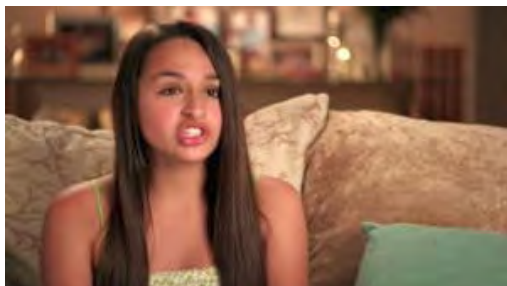


Jazz and Jeanette attend a transgender support group at the Stonewall National Museum & Archives. The group is largely attended by trans women of color.



The group is run by Rajee, who explains how she didn’t have access to trans discourse as a child.

The group is run by transgender actress, author, and activist Rajee Narinesingh. By some counts, Jazz seems to be Rajee’s opposite: Rajee didn’t have access to discourse, support, or services that would have enabled her to transition as a child, while Jazz does. The camera cuts to Rajee introducing herself to the TV viewing audience in a confessional. She describes herself as a once “effeminate gay male” who didn’t know anything about transgender identity growing up. The camera then cuts to Jazz explaining how Rajee got “disfigured” trying to access medical interventions by having a “back alley surgery.” As Jazz explains that some transgender women “feel they need to do procedures and surgeries to get rid of their masculine features,” the camera pans over the other trans women in the group, juxtaposing adult trans women with the voice of a trans youth explaining matter-of-factly about the difficulties they have faced. The show’s decision to pair Jazz’s voice with these women’s faces may be an attempt to suggest progress—Jazz has a handle on the discourse, facts, and history of trans experiences, and she has access to a trans childhood that they didn’t. They aren’t presented as co-present but rather as existing on uneven temporal ground, with Jazz representing



Jazz explains how trans women seek medical

interventions to “get rid of their masculine features.”

the future and progress and her trans peers representing the past and an earlier historical moment.



As Jazz speaks, the camera pans over two trans women in the group. Jazz's voiceover during this panning ...



... reminds the audience of Jazz's “exceptional” trans journey in beginning her medical transition as a youth.



Jazz describes with air quotes how all of her friends are doing the “boy thing.”



Jazz says she wants to explore but is confused, throwing her hands up while saying, “I don't know.”

Rajee invites Jazz to talk about her experience, and we witness the imposition of desire onto Jazz's future. Jazz first says that when she compares herself to her friends, she realizes that she has “always been a little bit behind.” This echoes the language used in the first episode of the season, when Jazz's mom described Jazz as being “a little behind her friends” in regard to gender and sexual development. The return of this language here to describe Jazz's sexuality suggests that Jazz has internalized the anxiety that exists around her gender and sexual development. But this anxiety doesn't dictate or mitigate her honesty in regard to where she is. She explains that she is watching her friends get into dating, to which she adds,

“I'm like, ‘Oh, maybe I could try this out and explore my love life.’ But I just don't know where to begin. I almost want to look for them, but, like, I don't know where to look; I don't know if I should look; I don't know what to do.”

The coupling of “I don't know” with throwing her hands in the air echoes earlier in the episode when Jazz was talking about the possibility of liking girls. She asserts that she is exploring and that there is no definitive object of her exploration—she doesn't know where to start “look[ing] for them,” purposefully using a gender neutral pronoun to capture any potential future love interest.

The group creates the space for Jazz to acknowledge queer possibilities, but the response she gets reasserts Jazz's heterosexual future. Rajee asks, “What kind of boys do you like?,” and Jazz replies, “The thing is, I haven't explored it so I'm not really sure . . . I just don't like cocky guys.” Jazz has tried to assert her undetermined sexual future, but in the space of the trans support group, she is still presumed to be heterosexual in the future when asked, “What kind of boys do you like?” She tries to hold onto queer possibility by reasserting that she's not really sure, but she ultimately tires out and discusses what “guys” she doesn't like. She then calls her ideal love interest “Prince Charming.” Despite Jazz's articulation of not knowing what sexual orientation she is, the trans women in the group hail her as a heterosexual subject who will one day find a boy. This moment when trans futurity (projected onto Jazz) and trans histories (marked by the older women in the group) touch is the moment when queerness both becomes possible and gets occluded. Jazz tries to insist on her queerness, here and across the episode, but she cannot fight the force of history, narrative, or medium. The supposed inclusivity that her existence on television represents occludes the forceful extinguishing of her sexual possibilities.

Jazz's mother reinforces the elision of Jazz's exploration of sexuality with an assertion of her heterosexual future. The other women in the group tell Jazz stories of how and when they came into dating, and the camera cuts to Jeanette in



Other members of the group talk with Jazz about their dating experiences.

a confessional. Earlier in the scene, she discussed how much anxiety she has over Jazz dating because of the high rates of violence against and murder of trans women, especially in romantic situations—a sobering fact that has led her to tell Jazz she must always disclose her transgender identity upfront to anyone she might consider dating. The very real fear that Jeannette feels about Jazz’s safety appears to evaporate in this confessional. The camera pans over the women in the group, and Jeannette says, “These young ladies went through puberty and all the trials and tribulations of that.” We cut back to Jeanette in the confessional and she continues, “And they’ve just jumped right into dating, and they have boyfriends.” The camera pans back to Jeanette smiling in the group, and she says, “I was really encouraged by that.” We cut back to the confessional and Jeanette concludes by saying, “I want that for Jazz.”



The camera pans over members of the group as Jeanette describes how relieved she is to hear their stories.



Jeanette is “really encouraged” to hear these women “just jumped right into dating, and they have boyfriends,” revealing her desire for Jazz’s heterosexual future.

Here, Jeanette is trying to analogize these trans women’s experiences with her daughter’s experiences. The earlier panning by the camera of the group served to distinguish these trans women from Jazz—they didn’t have access to the same resources that would enable trans survival and flourishing as Jazz. Now, the panning across the group happens at moment when Jeanette is falsely linking how “these young ladies went through puberty” with how her own daughter is “developing nicely into a young lady.” The editing of Jeanette’s desires to flatten the disparate temporal experiences of trans persons in the room is an attempt to alleviate her anxiety over Jazz’s future. Seeing these women in alignment with her daughter enables her to envision a heterosexual future for Jazz in which she, too, can “jump into dating” and “have boyfriends.”

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Rajee is also optimistic that Jazz will find her "Prince Charming."

The episode concludes with Rajee asserting that Jazz has "such a bright future" and will "meet that Prince Charming." The show permits space for Jazz to express questions about her sexuality. However, the show edits the responses to Jazz's declarations and assertions of exploration and non-definitive sexuality so as to ignore any meaningful acknowledgement of that exploration. Jazz can explore her sexuality, but this exploration can only be apprehended as heterosexuality. She can "be behind," as long as she thinks about guys and Prince Charming. The explicit preoccupation with Jazz's sexuality distinguishes her from other children in the reality show genre. Here, the discipling of this sexuality under the guise of natural and normative development in the face of Jazz's resistance to defining her sexuality makes for queer television, and this isn't a liberating queerness.

Across the first season, Jazz tried to articulate her queerness only to be met with responses that have ignored this queerness. When Jazz first introduces the idea of dating to her parents, they articulate surprise because they think it's "too soon," they don't want her to "rush," and they have always seen her as a little "behind" in regard to her friends. In the finale, a boy that has taken an interest in Jazz shows up to her graduation party. Jazz's parents watch from the window and say, "I'm so glad this is finally happening....It's so innocent. It's really so nice."



Jazz talks to a boy at her 8th grade graduation party.



Jazz's parents are relieved that this is "finally happening" and describe how it gives them "hope."

In her work on trans childhood and adolescence, Owen claims that in the trans child,

"Queerness is masked by innocence, erasing desire, submerging it under the guise of childhood. Childhood innocence is conferred to transgender phenomena by association, but this projection of innocence simultaneously prevents the recognition of transgender children as self-directed agents in their own lives" (103).

Jazz's "innocence" in this scene is about the comfort of adults around her who have spoken of their herculean efforts to support and affirm their child's identity but who cannot leave space for that same child's potential queerness. Innocence must be imposed and narrated in order to reduce the threat that Jazz poses by virtue of existing as a trans girl. Her sexuality is innocent now because it's with the proper object of desire. The first season has successfully asserted Jazz as a non-threatening gender and sexual object, establishing Jazz as a palatable trans subject for future consumption.

Queer regulation of Jazz's sexuality

across the series

The first season lays the groundwork for how Jazz's gender and sexuality are apprehended: her gender is stable, but the narrative arc of the series ultimately purports that her sexuality cannot be secured until she gets her gender confirmation surgery. The unassimilability of Jazz's desires are assimilated in these seasons—they are edited and apprehended as effects of not having yet had gender confirmation surgery. Jazz's gender and sexuality get framed as inextricably linked. Her sexuality persists as an explicit subject across the series, and ultimately the participants cannot discuss Jazz's present or future sexuality without discussing her body, which they can only consider in relation to normative concepts of gender (i.e., a particular, singularized synchronicity among body parts, identity, and expression). At times, the relation between Jazz's surgery and her sexuality seems to be about Jazz's feelings and gender dysphoria, but more frequently those around Jazz frame it as a concern they hold and an elision they make. In other words, their preoccupation with Jazz's sexuality and sexual development reveals an anxiety over what kind of sex she can have with whom based on her body parts, and what that will mean for her ability to fully and properly occupy the category of woman socially. This preoccupation results in a hyper monitoring of Jazz's body, sexual desires, and sexual practices that children are not generally subject to on network television.

While the show remains on TLC across the series, the family-friendly elements of the show get somewhat tempered, beginning in Season 3. Almost every episode begins with a disclaimer that states:

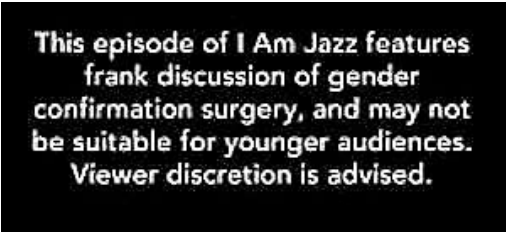
"This episode of *I Am Jazz* features frank discussion of gender confirmation surgery, and may not be suitable for younger audiences. Viewer discretion is advised."

Jazz is a trans youth, but this disclaimer positions Jazz in opposition to children. That is, discussing her experiences—a discussion that viewers want in exhaustive detail and that is keeping the show on air—requires "discretion." Trans childhood is a threat from which other children must be protected. Trans childhood can only be consumed by adults, who must surveil it to ensure that trans identity will not pose a sexual threat to the social. Fascinatingly, this disclaimer remains a fixture for the remainder of the series, shifting only for the episodes where Jazz actually undergoes gender confirmation surgery and related subsequent surgeries:

"This episode of *I Am Jazz* features graphic footage and discussion of gender confirmation surgery and may not be suitable for all audiences. Viewer discretion is advised"

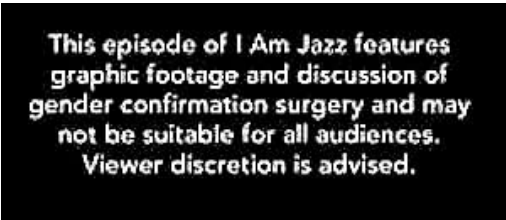
While this disclaimer is aligned with what appears at the beginning of most medical docudramas, regardless of how censored or not the actual featured procedures are, the logic for the shift from warning just "younger audiences" to "all audiences" is the "graphic footage." Jazz's body is discussed in graphic detail throughout the series: viewers have heard doctors describe the length of her penis, the size of her scrotum, and the depth of her vagina alongside probing questions about her ability to masturbate and orgasm. The disclaimer attempts to *protect adults* from having to see something they might not want to see; protecting Jazz from audience desires for discursive graphicness does not shape the series.

The show frames Jazz's body, sexual desires, and sexual practices as an inevitable public problem instead of a private matter between Jazz and any sexual partners she may have in the future. In Season 2, Jazz's grandmother has lunch with some of her friends, some of whom haven't met Jazz (Jazz is not at the lunch). They



This episode of *I Am Jazz* features frank discussion of gender confirmation surgery, and may not be suitable for younger audiences. Viewer discretion is advised.

Starting in season 3, most episodes feature this disclaimer suggesting the content may not be suitable for children, despite the fact that Jazz is a child.



This episode of *I Am Jazz* features graphic footage and discussion of gender confirmation surgery and may not be suitable for all audiences. Viewer discretion is advised.

Episodes featuring censored surgical procedures have this disclaimer, warning the episode is potentially too "graphic" for "all audiences."



Ladies who lunch and discuss trans youth.

begin to inquire about Jazz's romantic life, and one asks if Jazz "foresee[s] herself as having a boyfriend." Her grandmother replies that she does, and the camera cuts to a confessional featuring both the grandmother and grandfather. The grandfather states: "Let's call a spade a spade . . . No matter how attractive she is . . . she will be looked at in high school as the girl who has a thingy down there." The camera then immediately cuts back to the luncheon, where another friend asks about the surgery. The editing of these moments together explicitly merges the question of Jazz's romantic future with the status of her genitalia.



Jazz's grandmother's friend inquires if Jazz "foresee[s] herself having a boyfriend."



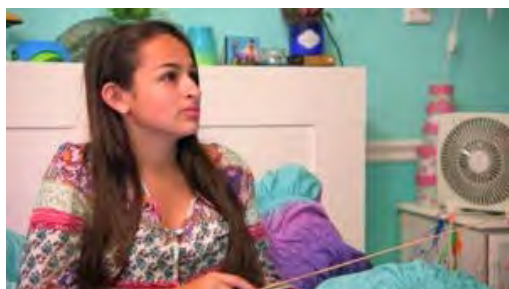
Jazz's grandfather often remarks on how surgery is a requisite for being a "complete woman."

Later in the episode, Jazz describes her desire for gender confirmation surgery as, in part, a matter of proving her identity to the public: "bottom surgery will let everyone know I'm a girl." The thing is, no one looking at Jazz—or anyone for that matter—knows what body parts they do or do not have based on looking at them. These framings—by both Jazz and her grandmother—are paradoxical because there is no way to publicly identify someone's body parts in the absence of disclosure. And yet, Jazz has to face public scrutiny over her body parts and how these body parts have a bearing on her sexual future. Jazz is forced to face everyone's questions about her as fair and legitimate inquiries by virtue of existing as a person who is out as a trans girl. Jazz's body and her body's relationship to sexual possibilities are presented on the show as a public concern, an anxiety held by the audience that they feel entitled to have addressed under the guise of curiosity, education, and concern for Jazz's well-being.



Jazz's grandmother appears floored when she hears a boy is interested in Jazz.

Later in this season, Jazz is asked on a date by a non-trans boy, Alex. Jeannette tells Jazz's grandparents, who are immediately suspicious, asking why a non-trans boy would be interested in a trans girl, suggesting it could be a sexual "experiment." In a confessional, the grandmother suggests that Jeannette's excitement about a "young man" in Jazz's life "bring[ing] Jazz into a more mainstream world" is clouding her judgment. The grandparents, in other words, are anxious that Jeanette's desire for Jazz to inhabit a proper "mainstream" sexuality could lead to perceived improper sexual engagement at this moment in Jazz's life pre-surgery. This anxiety prompts Jeannette and Greg to have a conversation with Jazz about sex, and Jazz is completely taken aback: "Does it look like I'm really doing anything sexual?" This question reflects how Jazz has internalized the way the world has approached her: that looking at someone somehow provides insight into their private information and activity. She thinks that looking at her could somehow reveal that she is not sexual. What she means, however, is that she does not have the body to engage in sex in the way she'd like: she asserts, "Clearly I can't have sex yet." When they ask why, she doesn't answer directly and instead the camera cuts to Jazz in a confessional: "I'm not trying to



Jazz is taken aback when her parents ask her about her sexual feelings and activity.

have sex right now, especially when I haven't had bottom surgery, I can't do much anyway." This view is affirmed in the next episode by Jazz's mother. Jeannette explains that Jazz is "a late bloomer when it comes to boys and dating because for the most part guys out there don't want to date a girl with a male body." Later in the episode, she states that most boys "just see Jazz for Jazz and not the girl who has a boy body." These statements iterate that gender confirmation surgery is all but requisite for Jazz to fully inhabit proper sexuality.

The desire for Jazz to inhabit proper heterosexuality is reinforced across the seasons. In the Season 3 premiere, her grandfather repeats that Jazz is "not complete until the surgery is complete." Jeannette agrees, stating that Jazz needs surgery "in her heart to feel complete and I think also when it comes to love, that's a big problem, unfortunately, there's people out there that are attracted and might think she's lovely, but you know what? I don't want to be physical with her." Jazz's desire for surgery to address her gender dysphoria is not enough in and of itself; her desire for surgery gets apprehended as a response to other people's problems with her as a sexual being. Jazz's grandfather reiterates that

"to be a complete woman as much as one can be being transgender the bottom surgery is absolutely necessary if you want to have a somewhat normal relationship with the opposite sex."



At Jazz's first consult for gender confirmation surgery, her doctor speaks frankly about how she'll "want to be able to, you know, have a relatively normal vaginal depth."

The gender confirmation surgery isn't just about permitting Jazz sexual experiences, but heterosexual experiences. Later in the episode, Jazz goes for her first consultation regarding gender confirmation surgery. The doctor asks Jazz if she's "orgasmic," then says, "It's nice to have a neurological sensation in your vagina." He explains, "These issues are not necessarily important to you now but they will be when you meet Mr. Right. And you're gonna want to have penetrating sex and you want to be able to, you know, have a relatively normal vaginal depth." The doctor tells Jazz what "will be" important to her when she meets a man and what kind of sex she will "want" to have to be "relatively normal." Seeking information about gender confirmation is not framed as strictly about Jazz's sexual health or care for her to have pleasurable sexual futures: it's about orienting her toward proper heterosexuality.

Gender confirmation need not have any bearing on sexual desires and possibilities for trans people, but the series promotes that the former is a condition for the latter. Jazz does not have the surgery until season 5, and seasons 2, 3, and 4 each follow a similar structure: as Jazz prepares for gender confirmation surgery across the season, she gets an opportunity for a date by the end of the season. The date happens, and even when it seems to go well, the next season begins with minimal follow up and the assertion of the same statement: no one is interested in Jazz because of the perceived asynchronicity between her body and gender identity. This statement is repeatedly asserted, despite the fact that *romantic interest in Jazz* is built into each season's arc.

What does shift is Jazz's own statements about her sexuality. Whereas these statements were unassimilated in the first season, they get assimilated into the arc of the series as being a problem that will be resolved with gender confirmation surgery. In season 3, Jazz announces that she is pansexual, explaining that that



At the end of season 3, Jazz goes on a date with

Shane and says that she likes him but is unsure if he likes her.



Jazz explains that she's pansexual against the backdrop of the childhood playground.



Jazz is discouraged after her date, worried she can't have a relationship, sexual or otherwise, until she has "a beautiful vagina."



While getting ready for prom, Jazz explains to her friends that she thinks guys will be more interested in her after her surgery.

means she is "fluid about who I'm attracted to." However, she still struggles with feeling like, in her words, "the odd man out" among her peers because she doesn't feel fully connected to being attracted to or interested in anyone. Jazz goes on dates with two boys and a girl (none of whom identify as trans), but she increasingly explains that while she wants to explore dating, she sees it as incompatible with not having the surgery. In the season 3 finale when she returns home from a date, she explains that

"if someone that I like is ready to have a relationship with me, then I do feel like it's kind of letting them down that I'm not ready for sex yet."

Jeannette tries to explain that Jazz can explore having a relationship without having sex, but Jazz has internalized the belief system that the series has promoted: she must think about her body and ability to engage with sex not just in relation to her desires, but in relation to assumptions about what someone else might want. Jazz states,

"I do want a sexual relationship in the future, and after all of these consultations, I can't imagine myself having sex without having a beautiful vagina."

Jazz's wording suggests that it's "all of these consultations" that have sedimented the belief she can't have a relationship, sexual or otherwise, without a vagina. The consultations have been focused on how she will have a vagina with depth, discussing in implicit and explicit ways how this will be compatible with penetrative sex with someone with a penis. Jazz is embedded in a network orienting her desires toward a heterosexual future.

Jazz has her surgery in season 5, and this season and the following (which is also the most recent) assimilate Jazz's apprehensions about her sexuality as resolvable through surgery. In the season 5 premiere, she explains that she "want[s] a relationship with a guy . . . I don't know exactly what I like, however, physically I think I'm more into guys and I just see myself being more compatible with a guy." She tells her trans friends,

"I think maybe after the surgery I'm gonna be more confident when it comes to dating, but in reality, I think the way it's gonna change is that guys are gonna be more open to dating me."

Jazz has been open about being pansexual, but the season that features her gender confirmation surgery opens with Jazz more definitively asserting an interest in guys that will be easier to explore post-surgery. The surgery is explained as something that will make guys "more open to dating" Jazz, not the other way around.

In the next episode, she fights with her mother regarding the fact she is having trouble dating. She shouts dating is hard "Because I [expletive] have a [expletive], mom!" (Technically, the expletives are bleeped out, but the second one is the word "dick," as the "d" and "k" sounds aren't silenced.) Jeannette follows up in a confessional by stating: "She wants to love somebody with a body she loves." The camera cuts back to the fight, and Jeannette says, "You think it will be better after the surgery . . . you'll be more open to finding love?" And instead of getting Jazz's response in the moment, the camera cuts to a confessional where Jazz elaborates:

"It could be easier for me to date after the surgery. I think more people are going to be open to dating me, especially if they are attracted to a girl who has a vagina rather than a penis."



The closed captions here show how TLC tries and fails at bleeping out Jazz's statement – that she is not open to relationships because "I fucking have a dick, mom!"

While Jeannette tries to assert that Jazz's discomfort with dating is about her own feelings regarding her body, the editing of the scenes features Jazz rescripting her inability to successfully date as a problem located in other people—a problem that will be resolved "after the surgery."

While Season 5 focuses on Jazz's surgery, it follows the same arc as previous seasons: in the latter half, Jazz encounters a romantic interest. In this season, Jazz meets a non-trans boy online, Ahmir, whom she announces as her boyfriend. Everyone remarks on how fast Jazz went from recovering from surgery to entering a relationship. Jazz explains that while her sexual desires remain inactive, she's "excited to figure it out" with Ahmir. Toward the end of Season 5, she states that she feels like she's "going through that 11-12 year old phase. I didn't go through that phase when I was younger, I'm going through it now." Jazz's surgery is enabling her to explore dating from a new position, in her mind, and now she is able to catch up. In this way, the asynchronicity between her gender and sexual experiences begins to shift, and she assures the audience that she's approaching temporal normativity. Later in the same season, she sees her doctor for a follow-up appointment and asks when her body will be ready for sexual activity. Including this information in the season assures the audience that Jazz is almost approaching temporal synchronicity between gender identity and heterosexuality.



Jazz asks her doctor when she'll be ready for sexual activity. Jeanette replies, "Never!"

Jazz and Ahmir end their relationship, but the series has resolved the problem of Jazz's unassimilable sexual desires by editing these moments to be about her "incomplete" gender identity. Her gender identity is asserted as stable and unfixed for her across the series, but in the public's eyes, this gender identity will not be fully secure until her sexuality is secured as non-threatening and normative. Instead of offering ways of understanding gender and sexuality as not necessarily contingent on one another, the series is edited to promote their inextricable relationship, and a relationship that is cause for concern in the case of Jazz. Jazz's sexuality is an explicit focal point across the series precisely because it is a source of anxiety for the viewers until she has gender confirmation surgery. The most recent season diverges from the formula of previous seasons—instead of focusing on Jazz's dating life, there's surprisingly little air time given to it. Instead, the focus is on Jazz's mental health, college search, and friends. Jazz's sexuality can occupy the backdrop in this season because she has had the surgery. The queer preoccupation with trans children's sexuality, then, is about a desire to impose a singular, standard trajectory onto trans persons, one that aligns the body, identity, expression, and orientation in ways that adhere to cultural norms for gender and sexual normativity.

The queer trans child on television

This investigation of *I Am Jazz* invites us to observe which gender, sexual, and temporal norms are made available for trans children to inhabit on screen and under what conditions. We must listen to trans children when they try to defy the norms imposed on them by the adults and communities in which they're embedded. We must also pay attention to the ways that the medium of television amplifies the impositions and pressures placed on trans children. Jazz's trans childhood as it is represented on television is a version of queer childhood. This queer childhood is an important representation—not because it expands trans possibilities, but because it reveals how non-normative approaches to children's genders and sexualities can instantiate as much harm as normative approaches.

To approach trans children as queer requires care—not care in the ostensible

adult mode of protection of trans children that is actually about adults' comfort, but rather so as not to repeat epistemic violence to trans children that stems from the quotidian and structural material violence they encounter. Trans children are doubly subject to figuration when considered by queer studies. Building on earlier work by Susan Stryker, Gabby Benavente and Gill-Peterson have observed the ways that

“trans people in particular become exceptionalized in a certain strand of queer theory, serving as a figure for a kind of anti-binary subversion of gender . . . we are struck by how persistent this theoretical figuration of trans people has remained . . . even if not the dominant paradigm of the field around gender and transness” (24-25).

Similarly, queer theory's approach to children often elides children with Children. (Rightful) critiques of the figural Child, often invoked to justify discriminatory presents under guise of creating better futures for children (Edelman 2004), leave literal children, queer and otherwise, behind. In her [engagement with Gill-Peterson's *Histories of the Transgender Child*](#), Rebekah Sheldon notes that Gill-Peterson's scholarship “demands that we recognize the ways that children have been made into figures for adult ideas but are, in fact, not so plastic that they might take on whatever figural labor adults happen to require.” In other words, trans children are vulnerable to projection and objectification when critiqued and theorized, and care must be taken not to further compound the harms they already experience.

This care is especially urgent in the context of television studies. In her reflection on the state of the field of queer television studies, Lynne Joyrich notes that the proliferative generation of television content in the form of “ongoing textuality” (135) can maintain and reproduce “heteronormative (or homonormative) vision[s]” (136). The medium itself relies on logics of futurity, progression, normativity, and reproduction. These are always vexed concepts, and they will be that much more so when representing and figuring the trans child. To acknowledge Jazz's queerness—even if that queerness is not about liberation or progress but actually about seeing the strange imposition of restriction, staticness, and silence onto her and her identity—is to try to create more space for her humanity and not to participate in processes to further dehumanize, objectify, or project onto her.

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Notes

[1] For the purposes of this essay, I am thinking about trans children who self-identify as trans and are out about that identity, but it is important to note that these are not *all* trans children. There are many trans children for whom that identity, discursively or otherwise, isn't available. And there are many recognized and less recognized ways to gather under the banner of the trans child, some of which overlap with ways that the field has identified queer children. And still there are other persons, including adults, who might identify with or inhabit modes of trans childhood that couldn't be lived out and yet co-linger with adult queer selves—a different version of Kathryn Bond Stockton's "ghostly 'gay' child" (27).

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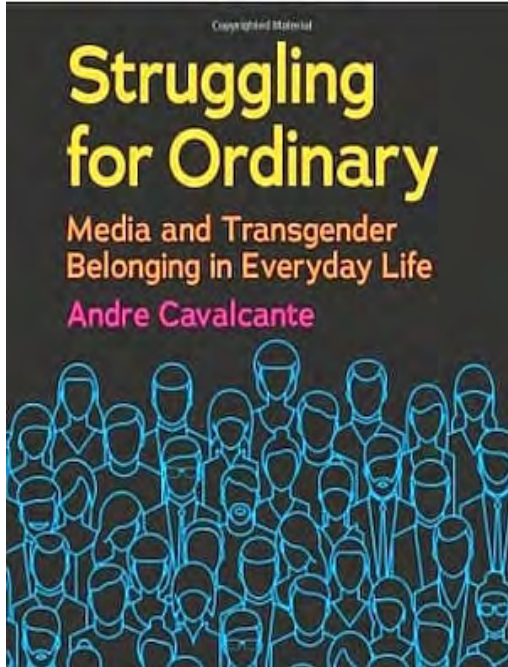
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Andre Cavalcante's 2018 book *Struggling for Ordinary* explores transgender media reception and its place in day-to-day life. The text provides a thoughtful ethnography that encompasses both rural and urban transgender lives.

Opening the field of transgender audience reception

review by [Beck Banks](#)

Review of *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life* by Andre Cavalcante (New York: New York University Press, 2018). 224 pages. \$27, paper.

In his first book, *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life*, Andre Cavalcante takes the reader through an ethnographic journey of transgender people's reception of the media and the role media play in their daily lives and identities. For four years (2008 to 2012), Cavalcante observed transgender support groups and performed in-depth interviews with people in the Midwest and, to a lesser degree, in San Francisco. Through a well-written blend of theory, observation, and interviews, he creates a concept that addresses his transgender interviewees' desire to be sometimes acknowledged as queer while wanting to live a life where daily tasks—finding a restroom, interacting with coworkers, or getting coffee at a cafe—are socially normalized. Cavalcante dubs this theory "queerly ordinary;" to participate in a queerly ordinary life is "lived queerness," that is, how queer people engage in day-to-day living.



The ethnography takes place from 2008 to 2012, prior to "The Transgender Tipping Point" article (2014) and the increase in transgender visibility that took place after it. *Struggling for Ordinary* provides a history of trans representation and a snapshot of transgender audience reception leading to



The book explores key moments in transgender visibility in the 20th and 21st centuries. Christine Jorgensen's rise to celebrity after surgically transitioning in the 1950s is among those.

this turn of events.



While trans activists, like Sylvia Rivera (right) and Marsha P. Johnson (left), frequently drove LGBTQ social movements, queer cisgender people often did not advocate for transgender rights. As a result and after the Stonewall Riots, Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson founded STAR, the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries.

Queerly ordinary means being able to experience in even amounts the mundane in everyday life and to be recognized as queer. A utopian idea of trans allows people to be perceived both as regular and as queer. Such a goal is not just something many transgender people want in their daily interactions but also in their media. They want to see transgender characters recognized in ways that do not fetishize or totalize trans identity. I want to see this, too. It's part of the reason I have started making trans-oriented films with other trans-identifying people. Honestly, though, it feels like it would take a tremendous effort to flatten and objectify the lives of the rural trans folks I'm working to document in my writing and productions. Yet, I see these reductive portrayals in mainstream shows...much more often than not.

During his fieldwork as a doctoral student, Cavalcante heard many transgender people speak about longing for ordinary life and having queer sensibilities. As he describes these queer sensibilities, he draws theoretically from the usual suspects (Duggan, 2003; Edelman, 2004; Epstein, 1996; 2003; Halberstam, 2011; Munoz, 2009; Warner, 1999), who discuss assembling a life lived in provocation, exploration, and creative unfolding. Cavalcante posits that this kind of utopian queer life is not always wanted or possible for transgender people. He adds, "I've always been uncomfortable placing the responsibility of 'the revolution' on the shoulders of the most marginal and disenfranchised" (pp. 19). Such a perspective, drawing on lived realities, lays the groundwork for the book and the lives examined.

The people interviewed span a spectrum of experiences. There is the Midwestern grandmother who transitioned later in life, remained married to her wife, and negotiated an open marriage as her sexuality shifted. There is also the San Francisco-based hyper-intellectual activist, artist, and writer who sees gender as a shifting landscape. Cavalcante doesn't simplify these voices; he presents various people and their complexities along with their media consumption and media use—social media, television, movies, chat groups, and more. He also provides a history of transgender representations on screen.



Participants found solace in a variety of characters in the media, whether intentionally coded that way or not. For instance, one participant loved the 1980s cartoon *Jem and the Holograms* and used the show's fashion as a model for dressing as a child.



As one participant expressed, drag queens and transgender people were often conflated in films like the 1995 movie *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* with (left to right) John Leguizamo, Wesley Snipes, and Patrick Swayze.



While many films prior to the "Tipping Point" provided reductive characters, some portrayals, such as *Boys Don't Cry*, offer more developed characters. The violence in the film, however, can factor into resilience reception and becomes an oft-repeated trope.

Cavalcante applies parasocial theory, affect theory, queer theory, post-structuralism, and cultural studies theory about representation to a new kind of audience studies. Academia lacks transgender audience reception studies and research. Cavalcante manages to bridge theories to write this book. It's no small feat.



Both film and television began exploring somewhat normalized (often depressing) lives of transgender characters. *All in the Family* featured a friendship between the Bunkers and the transgender character Beverly LaSalle. The friendship lasts a few episodes before Beverly is killed in a mugging.

The text draws the idea of the "ordinary" as a dialogue mediating individual agency and its battle with hegemonic structures. To do this, Cavalcante uses Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross' (2002) concepts as the fundamental basis of how he defines "ordinary" while acknowledging Henri Lefebvre's (1987) concept of the ordinary as a power struggle and Michel de Certeau's (1984) view of everyday life as one positioned in personal agency. He looks to E. Patrick Johnson's (2005) bidirectional view, looking both toward the academy and the front porch, to create a livable theory, to articulate "lived queerness."

Struggling for Ordinary updates ideas in queer studies, making them applicable to the transgender experience, thus contributing to the field of transgender studies and, particularly, to transgender media studies. The book is even more interesting because it encapsulates transgender media reception before the 2014 "Transgender Tipping Point," as Time Magazine (Steinmetz, 2014) dubbed it while addressing this cultural shift in gender attitudes finally visible to the mainstream.

Upon first seeing the Cavalcante book, I paused. I worried that the title indicated the book would focus on the tragedy of being trans. It does not. I feared it would work within binaries. It does not. I was concerned there would be an oversimplification, a two-dimensional portrayal of transgender life. That is not the case. Why did I have these concerns? Well, it's not just because I see these so often in the media; it's because of Cavalcante's positionality. He is a white, cisgender gay man with a tenure-track job. I have found that academia on the whole isn't moving forward with gender identity the way its students are.

Within circles of transgender graduate students from various universities, I regularly hear tales of uncredited work, tokenization, and transphobia. People doing transgender studies are not usually sought out in job descriptions or hired. It seems that cisgender scholars performing transgender research find it easier and safer to get recognition for their work than for it to be performed by trans people. At times, it feels like transgender people get studied instead of transgender studies. And I would not dismiss some of the fantastic work coming from cis people. It's needed. If the author's cis, however, that's enough to raise an

internal red flag...or several...when I first encounter a new text by someone who isn't trans-identifying.



The text takes a look at online resources and trans-centric media, such as the comic *Venus Envy* by Erin Lindsey.

Cavalcante does a remarkable job of putting transgender voices first. Within the first chapter, it's clear that he is deeply aware of his positionality and understands what it means to access trans lives and inclusive gatherings. Cavalcante makes note of the ways he is not a complete outsider. As a cis gay man, he says he comprehends the struggle around gender identity and expression. The political grouping of LGBTQ led him to be a transgender ally. The insider/outsider relationship further blurs as he begins to share his experiences in weekly transgender support groups, which shifted his research methodology into a participant-observer one. The book is an excellent example of how an outsider can do ethnographic research well and respectfully.

Cavalcante's primary idea of queerly ordinary or lived queerness creates a much-needed space for transgender people, one that offers respect to their lived experience and media representation. The theory can be applied to media representation and audience reception studies, pushing against transgender spectacle-oriented or medically-based narratives. The concept can be easily applied and expanded. However, while *Struggling for Ordinary* does an outstanding job of understanding transgender audience reception and portrayal, there is room for work that delves into other differences according to transfeminine, transmasculine, and nonbinary reception and more exploration of how place and situation shape people. The umbrella of transgender is immense in its scope.

Struggling for Ordinary contains another concept within it that is less developed: resilience reception. It looks at how people endure a constant barrage of negative



For one participant, Jess, *Legionnaires*, Issue #13 (1994), proved to be very important as a middle schooler. The comic character Matter Eating Lad transforms into a woman and teams up with a group of female space pirates. Jess saw how she wanted to be in the world and kept the comic near her bed for multiple rereads.

portrayals in the media. Cavalcante says that resilience studies have traction in other fields, just not yet in media studies. In one chapter, he focuses on resilience reception, using case studies to see how people have reacted to negative media portrayal. Resilience reception might involve approaching media with the expectation of disappointment and result in withdrawal and avoidance. Cavalcante is generous in sharing this partially formed idea, primed for development within the field.

Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life breaks ground in transgender audience reception studies and provides a new theoretical framework within transgender studies. It is poised to be a contemporary classic in this burgeoning field and media studies.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Between addressing familiar tropes and charting how trans representation has changed from the earliest moving images to the most recent, *Disclosure* (2020) makes space for varied (often singularly charming) personal responses from a large collection of trans interviewees.



Rain Valdez explains how the paucity of mainstream images of multiply marginalized groups places an untenable burden on whatever person or character appears to fill that role, joking that “You’re looking at the asian trans representation.”



Laverne Cox finds humor in trans viewers’ need to identify with unlikely images of gender nonconformity. She “live[s]” for Barbra Streisand’s role in *Yentl* (1983), but giggles while admitting “I don’t know if I’m the target audience.”

“Something to disclose”— Notes on *Disclosure* and the possibility of trans camp

by [Sid Cunningham](#)

In the 1964 essay that launched her career as a critic,[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag claims

“Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (Or, if it is cynicism, it’s not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism.) Camp taste doesn’t propose that it is in bad taste to be serious; it doesn’t sneer at someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures. [...] Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of “character.” [...] Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. [...] Camp taste nourishes itself on the love that has gone into certain objects and personal styles. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as “a camp,” they’re enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling.”[2]

It is this tenderness I must highlight from the very beginning, as my own defense against what might seem to be the tastelessness or insensitivity of the argument I am about to make. That is, trans culture needs to nurture its own deep-rooted camp impulses, and Sam Feder’s highly acclaimed 2020 documentary, *Disclosure*, should be celebrated for the subtle manner in which it achieves an alignment between trans viewing practices and camp.

Failure and artificiality are signatures of camp (as noted by Sontag but of course so many others as well); it may seem to be reinforcing cisnormativity to associate these motifs with trans media. It is not that trans bodies are inherently artificial, nor that trans genders must necessarily fail, however. Rather, a mode of enjoying artifice and incongruity is a viable response to the inevitable failures of *Disclosure*’s object of scrutiny: trans representation in mainstream film and television. In the above quotation, showing us Sontag’s “Notes” nearing the sentimentality of a wedding vow, I highlight this combination of love, tenderness, and appreciation as a plausible way to live with a surge of positive representation that can only fail to deliver everything it seems to promise. The only other possibilities might be disappointment and despair at the happy endings or sense of belonging we are denied, bitterness toward the images promising the fulfillment of our desires, or anger at ourselves for desiring (love, acceptance, an end to gender normativity) in the first place.

I am not the first to apply a camp lens to trans media; Marissa Brostoff does so



Actor and former sex worker Trace Lysette suspects that the disproportionate number of trans actors cast into minor sex worker roles means that “people are never gonna get to see us as a whole person.”



Exasperated with a scientifically-questionable trope, into which she and many others have been cast, Alexandra Billings emphasizes that trans people “don’t die from their life-saving alternatives to the gender containers they’ve been assigned. That’s not what kills us.”



Yance Ford wryly deflates the fantasy of queer solidarity, recognizing that “trans people make it really difficult for some people in the queer community to assimilate” and so erasure ensues.

masterfully in a 2017 article on Caitlyn Jenner’s reality show *I Am Cait*. She provides an excellent review of the work of earlier scholars like Pamela Robertson and José Esteban Muñoz who have recovered feminist and decolonial meaning in the style often associated with gay subcultures otherwise privileged by gender, race, and class, while pointing out that “camp performance sometimes seems to be everywhere but the transgender body.” [3] There are still scholars (like Halberstam) who argue that the irony of camp is an insufficiently broad affective repertoire to respond to all the pressing political (or antipolitical) projects of our time. As they claim, queer antisociality comes in many other forms which can deliver a much starker, “undisciplined” opposition to heteronormativity. [4] Camp isn’t the best or only response to straight culture, though; it’s a strategy that is productive in particular contexts. It’s a subtle move, one that works best in the centre of enemy territory.

Camp is a defensive strategy, and while it might not produce the most radical of effects, it allows the organization of queer sensibility to take place with little resistance in highly normative spaces that we cannot avoid traversing. Esther Newton’s groundbreaking 1972 anthropological study, *Mother Camp*, makes this spatial aspect of “camping” quite clear. As one of the professional “female impersonators” whom she interviewed points out, we can understand a performer to be “camping” on stage when they banter with the audience, but the prototypical environment of a “camp queen” is directly amongst her audience at a bar—or, even more dramatically, on public streets:

“She’ll walk down the street and she’ll see you and say, ‘Hi, Mary, how are you?’ right in the busiest part of town . . . she’ll actually camp, right there. And she’ll swish down the street. And she may be in a business suit; she doesn’t have to be dressed outlandishly.” [5]

Camp organizes queer pleasure directly under the nose of heterosexuality. I would argue that camp can serve similarly to enjoy the space mainstream representation allocates for transness while organizing dissensus with the underwhelming ends to which our stories and images are mobilized.

Before progressing into greater detail about how I understand *Disclosure* to engage in camp humour, it will be useful to address how this documentary has been generally understood (or rather misunderstood) by professional critics. In the following section of this essay, I will highlight how the film’s (typically glowing) reviews read a trans progress narrative of positive representation as *Disclosure*’s central message. However, these readings differ in important ways from the attitude made most explicit in the closing few minutes of the documentary and in comments made elsewhere by its director Sam Feder.

Positive representation: between the closet and *Disclosure*

When I was still an undergraduate student, in the awkward early stages of a medicalized transition that made graduate school the most obviously safe short-term career option, I made the mistake of discussing a planned project on trans road movies in terms of “positive representation.” After informing me that this was an outdated and unpopular framework among academics, my advisor graciously handed me a stack of photocopied pages from *Out Takes* to consult.

In Ellis Hanson’s introduction to that anthology, he describes a disjuncture between, on the one hand, queer activist demands of media “for so-called positive images, representations of sexual minorities as normal, happy, intelligent, kind,



Bianca Leigh mocks narratives which kill off supporting trans characters once they have served the role of “showing up with all the piss and vinegar and sassiness to wake up [the cisgender protagonist] and shake up the assumptions.”



“Look at me now!” laughs Sandra Caldwell. Her decades of experience give her the authority to comment on changes within the entertainment industry, but her recent public coming out also highlights the demand for trans performers to provide an autobiographical framing to their work.



Candis Cayne in *Dirty Sexy Money* (2007-2008).

sexually well-adjusted, professionally adept, politically correct ladies and gentleman who have no doubt earned all those elusive civil rights for which we have all been clamoring,” and, on the other hand, scholarly critical investments in queer viewing or reading practices which (besides their greater formal, aesthetic, and political nuance) do not postpone queer pleasure in and identification with popular media images until Hollywood produces overt and unproblematic gays and lesbians. While acknowledging the value in outrage which produces an organized queer political community, Hanson disparages it as a form of criticism which “can ask only one question of a film: Does it offend me?”[6]

To Hanson, Vito Russo’s 1981 monograph *The Celluloid Closet*[7] and its 1995 documentary film adaptation[8] stand in for the intellectual paucity of the entire “positive representation” approach. *Out Takes* is nearly two decades old now, and the filmic *Celluloid Closet* a quarter century old, but has all that much changed since then? The 2020 release of director Sam Feder’s documentary *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Film*[9] is an appropriate opportunity to ask this question, as its formal similarities to *The Celluloid Closet* are so obvious that many popular reviews immediately note them.

The Celluloid Closet consists of film excerpts intercut with clips of interviews with actors, directors, and critics. Lily Tomlin provides some added voice-over narration, describing broad trends as the film advances through the decades, while the interviewees share their responses which often reference specific films. *Disclosure* likewise follows a loosely chronological and tropological progression but is much more tight-lipped. It lacks an overt narrator, yet the exclusively trans collection of interviewees suggests a relatively coherent perspective made possible in part through well-established areas of concern.

I will address a number of these concerns later in the essay, but I must emphasize, for now, that a shared area of concern does not mean a consensus of values or critical perspectives. As I explore in more detail below, a large portion of the film consists of interviewees discussing negative trans-related tropes in film and television of earlier decades, often in terms that suggest the influence of a number of trans critics who don’t themselves appear—Julia Serano, Talia Mae Bettcher, Jack Halberstam, and C. Riley Snorton in particular.[10] However, these are nearly always accompanied by dissenting takes from other interviewees. With the absence of an overt narrator, it is harder to understand dissent as bracketed outside of an otherwise unified critical trans perspective.

The trans perspective that *Disclosure* presents coheres through agreement on the significance or intensity of certain images, but not on what they mean or what effect they have for trans subjects. Understanding the perspective of this multivocal documentary is made both challenging and worthwhile because we must reconcile the pain and pleasure that mainstream visual representation creates for trans viewers, even when strongly divergent affects are produced in response to a single image.

Disclosure titles some of its film clips, particularly those that are directly referenced by trans interviewees, but many arrive decontextualized and thus avoid narratorial presence while also weakening associations to their original context in favor of *Disclosure*’s narrative progression. This format makes a lot of sense for the heavily tropological approach that most of the film takes. One could, of course, dispute whether any particular film properly belongs to the representational cluster *Disclosure* uses it for. For example, Peter Debruge’s review of the film in *Variety* quibbles over the its critique of *Ace Ventura’s* (1994) “absurd” vomiting and the idea of “negative” filmic representation of trans characters being “directly responsible for suicide and abuse in the culture at large.” However, he does admit,



Chaz Bono in *Becoming Chaz* (2011).



Laverne Cox in *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019).



Jazzmun points out that Cox's character Sophia is "still a menace to society..."



.... but she's a "big fan" of how Cox (as a performer and celebrity) "took it to another level."

"there's no denying that trans lives are at disproportionately high risk, or that greater sensitivity (via shows such as "Transparent" and, yes, even "I Am Cait") is shifting public opinion in a positive way." [11]

The last portion of the *Disclosure* is most focused on trans representation enacted by actual trans performers, which also brings the film into the most recent history. There is a highlight on actor Sandra Caldwell's early career and eventual coming out. A wide range of work by other performers is referenced, but the film uses Candis Cayne's role in *Dirty Sexy Money* (2007-2008) as a major landmark, along with Chaz Bono's award-nominated series *Becoming Chaz* (2011), and Laverne Cox's role in *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-2019). Each major example is discussed in terms that suggest progress in terms of positive representation, yet other critical comments always make this ambivalent. For example, *Orange Is the New Black* garners much praise, Jazzmun notes that Cox's character, Sophia, is "still a menace to society." For all the comments that imply that these recent, high-profile images are in themselves a victory, the most unambiguous consensus among interviewees emerges as a recognition of shifting conditions of trans creative labor.

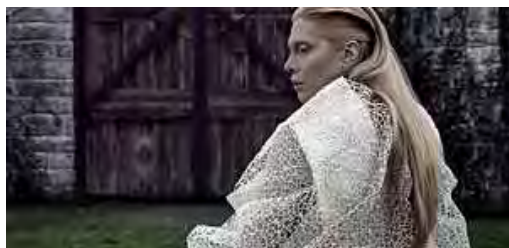
Where the juxtaposition of film clips and interviews becomes most complex is at the film's end. After its survey of the recent, most celebrated work by trans performers in trans roles, the last couple minutes conclude with a more macroscopic discussion of the current and future social impacts of increased trans representation. During these final moments we are shown a montage of very brief, untitled clips depicting trans actors in recent trans roles. Most of these clips serve as direct and literal examples of recent celebrated work by trans performers in trans roles, but two notably longer clips suggest more figurative meanings.

The first is a scene from the award-winning film *Una mujer fantástica* (2017): an extended long shot of actor Daniela Vega walking along a sidewalk into an increasingly impassable current of wind, a visual metaphor for minority struggle and resilience. This is followed by another ten seconds of short clips, and then the last eighteen seconds before the credits are spent on a scene which is truly the most jarring of the entire documentary. This break in format suggests we might read these scenes as a narrating instance, framing and commenting on everything that comes earlier, especially given the degree to which the final scene enacts a dramatic genre shift.

A stony-faced figure appears in extreme close-up, zooming out to reveal white gossamer lace robes and a white horse. A reverse shot, continuing to zoom out even further, places this solitary pasty trans fae among a whole field of similar figures (some gently floating, some mounted on additional white horses, some carrying spears) waiting motionless, humourless, and exhaustingly digitally reduplicated, behind a gigantic closed wooden gate in an endless stone wall. My first thought when I finished watching *Disclosure*: what is *up* with all those transgender white walkers at the end? This analogy to *Game of Thrones* may be unhelpful inasmuch as it suggests undead horror, but there is something distinctly uncanny about the figures the film closes on, and they are made particularly striking because it is the film's only particularly fantastical image incorporating a trans body, and it appears with so little helpful context. Following the scene of Vega struggling against the wind, and given that this scene accompanies a discussion of the present and future of trans media, one



Daniela Vega in *Una mujer fantástica* (2017).



Disclosure's final scene before the credits: trans fae ...

interpretation of this scene could be that these are not-yet-disclosed trans figures, waiting to be welcomed into our world through the gates of representation but still unmarked by the mundane struggles of contemporary trans life.

Is epic fantasy the next frontier of trans media representation? Why not? The genre appears a refreshing break from the tragedy and dramedy genres to which trans characters are currently most resigned in mainstream film and TV. Rather than making an argument for the value of specific genre movements in the future of trans representation, however, I'm claiming that this final moment in *Disclosure* is one of its most surprising and interesting, for anyone who wants to think about this film as a cohesive whole with a perspective of its own. At the conclusion of this paper I will return to expand on another possible reading of this ending, relying on intertextual and latent meanings of the fairies as well as subversive camp reading strategies *Disclosure* gestures to elsewhere.



... standing before a giant wall ...

... as a motionless horde.

For now, I simply want to draw attention to the shift in form in order to show the relationship it has to the moment in which the documentary was released. It's a strikingly literal manifestation of what Lauren Berlant has been theorizing as "genre flailing," a grasping gesture towards conventional forms and formulas that promise some defense against the intractability of ordinary crisis.

As Berlant herself describes it,

"Genre flailing is a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one's confidence about how to move in it. We genre flail so that we don't fall through the cracks of heightened affective noise into despair, suicide, or psychosis. We improvise like crazy, where 'like crazy' is a little too non-metaphorical. We see it in the first gasps of shock or disbelief, and the last gasps of exhausted analogy. But it's not always a wildly inventive action. When crisis is ordinary, flailing—throwing language and gesture and policy and interpretations at a thing to make it slow or make it stop—can be fabulously unimaginative, a litany of lists of things to do, to pay attention to, to say, to stop saying, or to discipline and sanction. Often in the pinch of a crisis we return to normal science or common sense—whatever offers relief in established clarity." [12]

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Laverne Cox as the face of the "Tipping Point."



Disclosure briefly references the life of Christine Jorgensen.



Jorgensen, as historian Susan Stryker notes, "was not the first trans person, not the first person to have genital surgery or take hormones, but she was the first person to become globally

Berlant began employing this term, "genre flailing," in her writing in the early days of Donald Trump's presidency in the United States and that serves as her most obvious image of the crisis provoking this flailing. Those circumstances have presented many new iterations of political crises for trans people, yet this can't be said to be the crisis that organizes *Disclosure's* general narrative or its final extravagant genre flail. Instead, the event that serves as *Disclosure's* motivating crisis is implicitly "The Transgender Tipping Point"—both the much-discussed 2014 *Time* article itself and the visibility phenomena it seeks to describe.

The 2014 *Time* article (accompanied by a glamorous cover photo of Cox) blends a profile of Laverne Cox with an overview of "another civil rights movement [...] poised to challenge long-held cultural norms and beliefs." [13] [[open endotes in new window](#)] The article largely conflates the celebrity visibility or trans outness of Cox with that of the visibly gender nonconforming audience attending one of her public talks; a breathlessly voyeuristic description of the crowd opens the article, implicitly figuring all trans bodies (against Cox's) as immediately readable and unthreatening in a gently comic manner:

"In the beaux-arts lobby of the Nourse theater in San Francisco, men in deep V-necks and necklaces walk by women with crew cuts and plaid shirts buttoned to the top. Boys carrying pink backpacks kiss on the lips, while long-haired ladies whose sequined tank tops expose broad shoulders snap selfies. About 1,100 people, many gleefully defying gender stereotypes, eventually pack the auditorium to hear the story of an unlikely icon." [14]

The author's newfound delight in the pleasures of clocking is tempered by later historical references, attesting to the actual long tradition of trans activism (which includes, at minimum, decades of lively debate about the politics of passing, and of the politics of treating passing as voluntary). All the same, the article optimistically claims,

"This new transparency is improving the lives of a long misunderstood minority and beginning to yield new policies, as trans activists and their supporters push for changes in schools, hospitals, workplaces, prisons and the military." [15]

There is a confidence here, mirrored in the evocative title of the article, that trans people have suddenly arrived as an effectively organized, and more importantly understandable group, and that from this point on our problems will all soon evaporate, turning out to require nothing more than a set of administrative policy adjustments.

Trans activists and scholars have typically been much more hesitant to conclude that 2014 or any year since represents a decisive tipping point against myriad forms of oppression dependent on an institutionalized and culturally engrained system of gender. As an example of what is really a very wide field of engagement, Juliana Huxtable and Robert Hamblin, both of whom are featured in interviews in the excellent 2017 anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, voice serious reservations about the potential rift between the lives of trans celebrities and the lives of those who are most typically subjected to violence on the basis of gender nonconformity. [16] Huxtable claims that,

famous for doing that."



The Christine Jorgensen phenomenon is partly reflected in the position of today's trans entertainment industry celebrities...



...such as Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, depicted here at the 2012 GLAAD Media Awards...



...or Chaz Bono, here with Lacey Schwimmer in *Dancing with the Stars* (2011).

"there is an actual moment of dynamic and, in many ways, powerful visibility, and perhaps there are reasons why it's happening that we can point to. I think there are a lot of cultural factors in terms of gender variance that are hot-button issues now. I think, in terms of larger fantasies and narratives around social progress, visibility just fits into an ideal of where we would be at this moment; it's the next logical step from third wave feminism or cyber culture or the juridical advancements of mainstream LGBT rights."

"But it's an empty gesture in a lot of ways. And it's a gesture that I'm always questioning. Are they—meaning the audiences obsessed with and consuming media about transness—tapping into a derivative pornographic obsession with transgender bodies? Or are they putting me on display as a circus freak show, in a 'We're all secretly laughing at you' sort of way? That's the anxiety that I've gotten from the whole situation, because I think that the policing and the violence against trans people have a direct relationship to that increase in visibility. The people who gain visibility—those whom the media deem to be relatively 'passable' in one sense or another—end up being used as examples to police trans people generally." [17]

We can certainly hope that the respectability of Laverne Cox, Jen Richards, Chaz Bono, or any variety of mainstream trans celebrities might help change cis hearts and minds towards the trans people they encounter in their own lives. As Huxtable points out, however, the trans celebrity could just as easily function as an unrealistic ideal of proper transness, which leaves many people consigned to an abject "bad trans" position.

Hamblin, following attention that the South African media gave to his transition as a white trans man, came to understand that this attention on him as an exemplary highly privileged trans person was actively unhelpful, that his "narrow and privileged view of transgender emergencies was redundant" when "black transgender people were acutely visible and in danger in society, and their rights were nowhere in reach." [18] Hamblin chose to leave the trans rights organization he had founded and instead work on contributing trans-specific programming to an existing Cape Town sex workers' organization. I bring up these examples of skepticism about the value of trans celebrity visibility not because I wish to imply that *Disclosure* is operating in a framework that was already stale at the "Tipping Point" moment. Instead, I want to point out that it can be productive to understand *Disclosure* as fundamentally organized around feeling out this ambivalence. Is mainstream visibility harmful? Is it ever helpful? If trans visibility cannot produce meaningful positive social changes, then what type of relationship is it possible for trans people to have to popular media? These are the questions that animate the film.

Director Sam Feder has been quite clear about his intentions in this area. *Jump Cut* published an interview with him in Fall 2016, at which point he was already working on *Disclosure*. In the interview, he observes that:

"With media attention declaring a shift in visibility as a 'tipping point,' I hear liberal allies noting this as a success for trans people in general. However, I don't see success reflected in our lived reality except for the uplift of a few actors. Visibility is not always or necessarily a good thing. It can leave some people more vulnerable to harm, particularly when we consider the intersections of race, class, citizenship, religion, ability, etc. The recent increase in opportunities for visibility is often framed as success, presuming an improvement for all trans lives. This quick move to call this particular visibility 'success' performs two

erasures: of the ongoing (or increased) struggles in trans people's lives and of the previous visibility of trans people in media.”[19]

There is a striking similarity here to Cox's comments which conclude the film, as we are shown an image of her photo on the cover of *Time*'s “The Transgender Tipping Point” issue (just before the montages and two figurative scenes I mention above): “We always have to be really skeptical when a few people are elevated, and the majority of people are still struggling.” These comments from Cox are expanded on by Chase Strangio, who the film credits as “Attorney at ACLU” (the American Civil Liberties Association):



Chase Strangio calls for "material redistribution."

“The trans person on the red carpet, or the trans character on television and film, those sort of representations of transness may incite rage in a viewer. And that viewer doesn't have access to the character. They have access to the person on the street. I think that makes it especially important for us to be pushing for actual material redistribution. Otherwise, all we're doing is elevating some people into the sphere of the powerful and not in any way working to disrupt the systems that exclude most trans people from material survival.”

The audio then switches to Susan Stryker (historian, documentarian, and founding editor of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*), who tells us,



Susan Stryker reminds us that "things can spin on a dime."

“There is still a lot of work to do, and we can't think that just because you see trans representation that the revolution is over. You know. It's not. Things can spin on a dime. Having positive representation can only succeed in changing the conditions of life for trans people when it is part of a much broader movement for social change. Changing representation is not the goal. It's just the means to an end.”

The final minute of narration is once more in Cox's voice, and she leaves us with open-ended, but cynical, speculation:

“I wonder if people who watch and love these shows, I wonder if they will reach out to trans people in need and work to defeat policies that scapegoat us, policies that discriminate against us, policies that dehumanize us. Because until that happens, all that energy from the silver screen won't be enough to better the lives of trans people off the screen.”

These comments certainly could be taken as a simple call for positive representation which is part of a wider progress narrative. There is much evidence that this is how many mainstream critics view the film. We can see this in the *Rotten Tomatoes* film synopsis, for example:

“*Disclosure* engrossingly illuminates the history and effects of the way transgender lives are depicted onscreen—and outlines how much progress still needs to be made.”[20]

Yet to arrive at this understanding of the film seems to mean total disengagement with Strangio and Stryker's comments about 'revolution,' 'material redistribution' and how '[t]hings can spin on a dime.' Even Cox's own words trouble the narrative of progress as a positive correlation between mainstream representation and trans political agency or liberation. The physical attack from a stranger she experienced November 2020 when walking with a friend in an L.A. park is even more chilling evidence that even Cox herself is not granted immunity from transphobic violence

by grace of her celebrated media role.[21] By leaving these comments questioning the value of trans celebrity visibility for the documentary's last few minutes, the impression is left that the film makes the relationship between mainstream trans representation and progress towards trans liberation less certain, not more.

If we look at Cox's own work as an example, both on and off screen, this rupture may come into clearer focus. Cox is the face of "The Transgender Tipping Point"—her role as a celebrity, and the role she played on *Orange Is The New Black*, serve to reassure a cisgender mainstream public that yes, it's possible to enjoy a trans protagonist and envision a present-future where trans subjects are properly incorporated into liberal politics. While Cox's activist work around prison abolition suggests a considerably more radical approach, this doesn't mean that the role she plays as a celebrity cannot primarily serve to produce milquetoast (and apolitical) enjoyment of trans inspiration porn or pity. So how else might we view *Disclosure*, or view mainstream trans media representation? We're not hungry simply for a greater quantity of representation—a suggestion Jen Richards makes in the documentary, and which *Variety* duly records in the closing sentence of its review, as if this was the most insightful concept presented by the film. What we want (by which I mean myself, by which I mean trans people, by which I mean everyone) is fresh genres with new affects.

This problem has received recent attention in trans academia, as our field groans for fresh perspectives under the burden of 30 years of scholarship while we nevertheless are forced to continue marketing ourselves as a nubile emerging subdiscipline. This may be best articulated in the entertainingly edgy dialogue, "After Trans Studies," between Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager that was featured in *Transgender Studies Quarterly's* Winter 2019 issue. While generally critiquing the reflexive anti-normativity of trans studies, our disparaging theoretical treatment of passing, and the degree to which our field uncreatively reuses queer theory concepts, the dialog also uses a psychoanalytic/affect-oriented approach to indicate that different approaches to genre might be the most generative movement today.

Harsin Drager claims.

"In trans studies, it seems to me that we are telling a story of our victimhood (tragedy) or a story of our resistance (romance). I am much more interested in a satire, a genre about how truly disappointing and sometimes even boring it is to be a trans person in this world." [22]

This description of the scholarly field can equally serve as an indictment of the primary gestures of contemporary mainstream trans representation in television and film. In attempting to free ourselves of the bad tropes of the past, we are left with a very narrow horizon within which we can take pleasure in seeing trans people. We tie ourselves in knots trying to figure out how to represent oppression in a way that renders us dignified and respectable. We risk "humorlessness," [23] because we so deeply need for the trans object represented to finally appear unquestionably worthy of love and attachment. This burden is simply too much for any trans body to bear, onscreen or off.

At the conclusion of this article, I further address how we might distinguish a camp break from this critical deadlock with one that is more broadly satirical. In arguing that *Disclosure* is an ironic, campy love letter to the politics of positive representation—which assumes the ultimate failure of this approach, and is thus a fundamentally different approach from that of *The Celluloid Closet*—I still recognize that there is a good deal of sincere consensus between interviewees on tropological concerns, much of which displays the influence of some of the most prominent media critiques from the field of trans studies in earlier decades.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Authenticity and convention



Versatile "little Tommy Hanks," as he appears in *The Celluloid Closet*.

One of these concerns is the matter of casting and authenticity. *The Celluloid Closet* doesn't concern itself too much with actual correspondence between queer characters and queer performers, and seems to see straight participation in queer filmic moments as a positive moment of allyship; hence we are shown an interview where Tom Hanks talks up the value of "little Tommy Hanks" helping to make an AIDS patient "likeable" and "unthreatening" in *Philadelphia* (1993). In contrast, the cisgender casting issue is raised near the end of *Disclosure*, and it's discussed as an ongoing, contemporary problem. Given this, special significance accumulates around moments in the documentary where trans interviewees enjoy or otherwise refuse to dismiss their investment in the work of cis performers playing with gender.



Divine in *Hairspray* (1988).



Zackary Drucker describes her childhood interest in Edna Turnblad.



Chris Sarandon in *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975).

While Zackary Drucker speaks positively of Divine's camp performance in *Hairspray* (1988), (as well as Holly Woodlawn, and Candy Darling, and Jackie Curtis in Paul Morrissey films), Drucker's praise is grounded in the fact that these are, in fact, implicitly cis (woman) roles. She recalls renting the *Hairspray* VHS as a child, "and having the sense that, Edna Turnblad, there was something different about her [...] those kinds of [...] slippages are really meaningful for a young person." These roles seem designed to tease and intrigue a careful viewer, and they gesture towards a queer world beyond the temporary, parodically heteronormative fiction that these performers participate in. Something less subversive has been taking place in explicitly trans film roles in recent decades. Cisgender male actors continue to be cast as trans women and, as *Disclosure* points out, they continue to be rewarded in such roles.



Sarandon at the Oscars. He did not win the Best Supporting Actor award.

John Lithgow was also nominated for Best Supporting Actor (for his role in *The World According to Garp* (1982) and he also failed to win.

Disclosure highlights this phenomenon starting with Chris Sarandon in *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) and John Lithgow in *The World According to Garp* (1982), continuing up to the more recent performances of Cillian Murphy in *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), Jared Leto in *Dallas Buyer's Club* (2013), Jeffrey Tambor in *Transparent* (2014-2017), and Eddie Redmayne in *The Danish Girl* (2015). Given the revelations of Tambor's sexual misconduct on set (attested to in *Disclosure* by Trace Lysette) and Redmayne's defense of author J.K. Rowling's flirtation with fringe transphobic feminist discourse,[24] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) suspicion toward big name cis male actors in transfeminine roles seems quite reasonable. With the exception of Tambor, these critically acclaimed and award-winning (or nominated) roles are in film. The trans actors interviewed or mentioned in *Disclosure*, in contrast, primarily appear in mainstream television roles.



Cillian Murphy (as Kitten) performing at a peep show in *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005).



Murphy ultimately lost the Best (Musical or Comedy) Actor category at the Golden Globes, but won Best Actor at the Irish Film and Television Awards.



Jared Leto (as Rayon) in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013).



Leto winning the Best Supporting Actor Oscar.



Eddie Redmayne as Lili Elbe in *The Danish Girl* (2015).



Redmayne, about to lose the Best Actor Oscar.

Where *The Celluloid Closet* has nothing to say about the medium, with *Disclosure*

the time has apparently arrived for queer television to be taken seriously. This attention could be merited simply because trans performers have achieved a level of success in trans roles in prestige television drama and dramedy like *Pose* (2018-), *Sense8* (2015-2018), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), and *The L Word: Generation Q* (2019-)(to name a few recent examples that are dealt with in the most celebratory fashion by *Disclosure*) that has not yet been matched in feature-length Hollywood films. However interviewees pay just as much attention to trans content in earlier TV history. While the documentary seems to be the most hopeful about recent television, there are glimmers of potential in interviewees' responses to earlier depictions—mostly those that happen in comedy and reality genres.



Nomi (played by Jamie Clayton) asks her girlfriend, Amanita (played by Freema Agyeman), "Do you know that feeling when you're sitting in a movie theatre, and everyone's laughing at something and you just don't get it?" in *Sense8* (2015).

Laverne Cox is one of *Disclosure*'s producers, but she also serves as an anchoring voice for the film through her interviews. Along with Jen Richards, Cox's clips appear most frequently, and it is her perspective in the interviews that both opens and closes the documentary. After we are shown a clip from *Sense8* where Nomi (played by Jamie Clayton) asks her girlfriend, Amanita, "Do you know that feeling when you're sitting in a movie theatre, and everyone's laughing at something and you just don't get it?" we hear Cox's voice connecting this affective discrepancy to a wider pattern of trans abjection and marginalization, as she confesses "I never thought I'd live in a world where trans people would be celebrated on or off the screen." While the first clip of dialogue references the space of the movie theatre, it turns out that the more intimately domestic space of television viewing might be even more relevant to trans subjectivity and viewing practices.

The first clip of Cox's voice is followed by a brief introductory montage gesturing to the film's range of concerns. Three minutes in, the montage ends and we return to Cox discussing her childhood. It is a curious moment that implies an alignment between the beginning of this divergent viewing response and the beginning of a conscious transgender identity. Cox tells us.

"What's interesting for me about growing up in Mobile, Alabama, and then having my first interactions with what it meant to be transgender happening on television, is that even when the characters weren't necessarily trans identified, I think those characters affected how I thought of myself as a trans person and how the general public probably thinks about trans people. And one of those early images for me was the character of Geraldine from *The Flip Wilson Show*."

After we are shown a brief clip of Geraldine singing, Cox continues,

"I remember I would watch it with my mom and my brother, and my mother loved Geraldine and would laugh at that character, so it was something that existed in the realm of humor."



Geraldine in *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970-1974).

The issue of humor in this instance of televisual cross-dressing is complex, and not just within this nuclear family microcosm of viewership. As Marjorie Garber noted nearly 30 years ago, Flip Wilson achieved mainstream success precisely because of his Geraldine performances.[25] Wilson's biography attests that he "saved" this "brassy, sexy, liberated 'woman' [who] was the apotheosis of Flip's drag characters" for a 1969 Labor Day special which captured 42% of viewership in its time slot. That special led to the contract for *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970-1974), which was historically groundbreaking both for Wilson's then-uncommon producer billing (with an accompanying greater right to syndication profits) and for being the first show starring and titled after a black performer to garner such widespread success. A January 1972 issue of *Time* magazine featuring Wilson's face (out of drag) on the cover heralded him as "TV's First Black Superstar." [26]

While Wilson understood that Geraldine "could get away with things that were



Geraldine duetting with, and fawning over, Ray Charles.



Cox describes hiding her childhood fascination with trans television characters.

still transgressive for him” and believed that “Geraldine’s success indicated his rapport with both sexes,” Garber recognizes that this “transvestite in her wig and Puccis [who] opened the door for blacks to mainstream TV comedy” is nevertheless troubling inasmuch as this representational and economic success seems to have only been made possible by the marketability of “a stereotyped racial portrait of the dominating black woman [...] at a time of political militancy among blacks.”[27] The Geraldine role, and the cultural position it carved out for Flip Wilson, is troubling because it raises many questions about the invisible limits on how female, black, and queer bodies can circulate, and at whose expense laughter happens. As much as Geraldine is the author of memorable quips like “when you’re hot, you’re hot. When you’re not, you’re not” and “what you see is what you get.” there is also the dangerous possibility that she is fundamentally not in on the joke—the humor of her scenes exists outside of her awareness.

The *Flip Wilson Show* clip shown in *Disclosure* features Geraldine fawning over and singing along with Ray Charles, while a multiracial studio audience in the background laughs. In the absence of a clear line between genuine expressions of femininity and sexual interest and those that are mocking or intentionally artificial, the irony of this scene is carried by Geraldine’s non-acknowledgement or obliviousness to the audience. Through the entire segment, she wriggles around the piano and remains focused intently on Charles, who, in contrast (as the “straight man”) is focused on the musical performance itself.

Cox’s comments on this scene are ambivalent. Her mother both loves the character and laughs at the character. Cox’s earlier reference to the movie theatre and the experience where “you just don’t get it” suggests these scenes are not laughable for her (in childhood), but still, she may be able to enjoy these visions of gender-crossing, particularly when they begin to verbalize strategy. She concludes the clip saying, “whenever there was something ‘trans’ this or ‘sex change’ that, I would be very interested and I would sort of lean in, but very, sort of, discreetly.” Instead of experiencing vicarious embarrassment in this moment of identification with a clownish trans image as the affective break from the cisnormative response of laughter, Cox provides us the possibility of enchantment. She recognizes the dangerousness of the discrepancy between her response and that of her family members, and defends herself not against investment in the comedic trans figure (which is one way we might understand her family’s laughter) but against disclosing a divergent affective response, or one with a slightly different object.

Lee Edelman notoriously advocates for a radical “embracing” of the negativity ascribed to queerness[28]; in the final section of this essay I further discuss how his formulation of reproductive futurity can serve as the object of trans camp, using *Disclosure*’s final moments as an example. This moment and others tarry with the problems of negative representation—the histories, stereotypes, and hurt they can evoke for marginalized audiences—but they leave open the possibility that a viewer might enjoy them or even laugh for other reasons. Cox’s reminiscence of trans images from her childhood is mostly focused on work by black performers, much of which could be understood as negative in a variety of senses.

Geraldine is a bad, comedic object who ushers in cisnormativity through farce, inasmuch as we understand her visible gender-crossing as the main source of comedy or as inherently ridiculous. Geraldine also represents the negativity associated with the “Sapphire” trope, as LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant points out in her genealogy of major comedic roles leading to the fat black drag “Sappammibel” films of the 2000s (featuring Tyler Perry’s Madea character, Martin Lawrence’s Big Momma, and Eddie Murphy’s Rasputia).[29] Beyond the critiques that Wilson’s work as Geraldine (or other such black comedic drag roles)



Jamie Foxx performing in drag on *In Living Color* (1990-1994).



Jay Pharoah (as Floyd Mooney) experiences castration anxiety in *White Famous* (2017).



A minor trans character, Thad, appearing on *Married With Children* (1994).

serve to reinforce negative stereotypes about transfemininity or black femininity, we must also consider fears that drag is a manner of erasing or undermining black masculinity for the enjoyment of white audiences.

Cox describes and historicizes this emasculation problem herself in another interview sequence in *Disclosure*:

“There's all sorts of theories of black male comedians doing drag and that needing to be a rite of passage. [...] there is a history of emasculating black men in this country. Like, a literal history, during slavery and during Jim Crow, when black men were lynched, often their genitalia was cut off. And so, a black man donning a dress is this emasculating thing. And I do feel like the relationship that a lot of black people have had to me is about that legacy of trauma around...the historic emasculation of black men in America. Putting a black man in a dress, in some people's minds, takes away the threat. ‘Oh, we can laugh now.’”

These comments are illustrated with a brief, early ‘90s clip of Jamie Foxx in drag on the sketch series *In Living Color* (1990-1994) and a longer excerpt from the series *White Famous* (2017). The latter depicts rising comedian Floyd Mooney (played by Jay Pharoah) being advised by Jamie Foxx (as himself) to further his career by wearing a dress; this leads into a scene of Floyd imagining himself screaming in horror after realizing the dress given him has caused his penis and testicles to disappear. In the *White Famous* episode this emasculation fantasy scene is part of Floyd's broader fear of “selling out” and the demands of so-called crossover success. Foxx, who wears a pleated skirt, constantly threatening to expose Floyd to his genitals, figures this sell-out future through an absurd and grotesque blend of hypersexuality and castration.

While this is a comedic scene about drag emasculating black performers, it is ambiguous whether the real butt of the joke is Foxx's “selling out” of his masculinity, or Floyd's hysterical and ineffectual defense of his. Noting the similarity between her use of negative black media texts and camp reading strategies, Raquel J. Gates suggests that “the negative image functions as the repository for those identities, experiences, and feelings that have been discarded by respectable media”[30] and that the desire to eliminate them unreasonably assumes

“that media representations have a direct and straightforward impact on people's ideologies, that media images matter more than histories of institutional oppression, and that audiences always interpret images in predictable and knowable ways.”[31]

This unpredictability manifests in *Disclosure* not only between interviewees but in the varied responses a single person might have to difference instances of negativity. As the documentary progresses through its survey of cis actors performing in trans roles and the ensuing negative tropes, we are shown Cox running through a gambit of affects. A laugh track greeting the arrival of a burly cross-dressed male actor in a *Married With Children* (1994) clip follows a brutal anecdote from Cox about people bursting into laughter as she enters the subway. But while other interviewees speak seriously of the negativity of the trans serial killer trope, Cox is depicted laughing over Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and



Cox shares a difficult story of public humiliation.



Cox jokes "What's going on, Alfred [Hitchcock]? From the grave. Talk to us."

the repression that such work could imply.

The documentary is most fascinating when it provides interview clips that depart, in this manner, from the affect appropriate to the genre, or from the majority response among other interviewees. Comedy is generally discussed in the film with plenty of suspicion. The film includes many interview clips which critique tropes most closely related to the "deceptive transsexual" and "pathetic transsexual" figures described by Julia Serano in 2007. Serano and her work in the area of pop cultural critique in *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* are never directly referenced (although she is thanked in the credits), but the influence of her work is deeply imprinted on most of the younger interviewees. The "pathetic" trope describes images where the trans character (in this case, always a woman) is depicted as incapable of passing, and therefore unthreatening and typically ridiculous, while a "deceptive" trans character initially passes—only to have her transness revealed later. Like Serano, *Disclosure* traces the gesture of vomiting as a response to the inadvertent discovery (or disclosure) of a passing "deceptive" trans woman from the dramatic context of *The Crying Game* (1992) to the comedic context of *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994) and a succession of less memorable imitations. [32]



Stephen Rea (as Fergus) vomits in shock and disgust after seeing the genitals of his love interest in *The Crying Game* (1992).



Jim Carrey (as Ace Ventura) performing an elaborate and grotesque purging routine after his character realizes that a previous romantic interest (and antagonist) is trans.



Leslie Nielsen (as Lieutenant Frank Drebin) retching in *Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult* (1994).



Brian (the talking dog) vomiting after learning of a prior date's transness in the animated sitcom *Family Guy* (2010).



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| Bradley Cooper (as Phil Wenneck) gagging as he learns his friend has been anally penetrated by a trans sex worker in <i>The Hangover Part II</i> (2011). | Michael D. Cohen is left "emotional" and struggles to find words to describe the disgust conveyed by the vomiting trope and the impact it has on him. |



Reno Prestige Wright on *Jerry Springer* (1997).

Serano furthermore claims that “‘deceivers’ are most often used as pawns to provoke male homophobia in other characters, as well as in the audience itself” and that this dynamic is “most evident” in talk shows and reality television. [33] Many of *Disclosure*’s interviewees are likewise suspicious of the vulgar spectularity of these genres—Ser Anzoategui describes these shows as a “circus,” while they are a “car crash” to Trace Lysette. Yet *Disclosure*’s interviewees are divided about this format. Multiple interviewees mention the 1998 appearance of Reno Prestige Wright on *The Jerry Springer Show* (1997) as one of their first encounters with black transmasculinity.

Trans and intersex model Caroline Cossey’s (a.k.a. Tula’s) appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* (1990) is remembered for the unhesitatingly blue questions of its host—“How did you keep people from knowing you had a penis? [...] W-Was it a real small penis? ‘Cause I’d have trouble tucking mine away, you know? [...] Can you have an orgasm?” This talk produces cringe for Laverne Cox: she exhales heavily and mirrors Tula’s nervous laughter, adding, “that’s really hard to watch now.” Ser Anzoategui instead remembers the Tula-Hall interview with admiration, praising her “grace [...] her humor and her wit,” after we are shown a clip of Tula’s glib reply to the “orgasm” question. She says that “like most women

say, you know, it depends on the guy,” to which Hall bashfully giggles and rocks, hands between his knees.

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| Arsenio Hall drills Caroline Cossey (Tula) on her genitals on <i>The Arsenio Hall Show</i> (1990). | Tula laughs nervously at Hall's bold approach. |
|  |  |
| Cox finds the <i>Arsenio Hall Show</i> footage "really hard to watch now." | Ser Anzoategui is dazzled by Tula. |
|  | Tula turns the question about the functionality of her body into a question about men's sexual prowess, making Arsenio Hall giggle. |

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Leslie Feinberg would rather pathologize racism than gender dysphoria on *The Joan Rivers Show* (1991).



Kate Bornstein charms Joan Rivers and her guests while discussing gender identity.

While the salacious tone of this talk show programming may not have been exceedingly kind or gentle to its trans guests, it all the same served as a channel through which trans bodies and trans self-expression could be distributed and recorded.[34] [\[open endotes in new window\]](#) Despite misgivings about exploitation, Jen Richards “admit[s] it was also really cool just to see actual trans people on television,” and Zackary Drucker observes that “so many of those people [who appeared as trans guests on daytime talk shows] are monuments in our community.” Drucker nevertheless acknowledges, laughing

“it was a hustle for them. It was an opportunity to get paid and to tell their story. And it did reach us.”

Not only could witty trans celebrities like Tula use the less scripted format to occasionally get the last laugh, but it was also possible for relatively radical trans politics to be voiced in these venues. For example, we see Kate Bornstein describing the concept of gender identity in a 1991 clip from *The Phil Donahue Show*. Later, a clip from *The Joan Rivers Show* depicts Leslie Feinberg jokingly deflecting the pathologization of trans people by suggesting that instead, vicious homophobia and racism among the Ku Klux Klan or conservative politicians merit analysis: “How about talking about why Jesse Helms needs some therapy?”

Disclosure owes a debt to Bornstein not just for her appearances, but also for her arguments (in her part-autobiographical/part-theoretical monograph *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*) about talk shows as a venue. While accepting that the format does generally frame trans guests as “freaks,” she stresses that she “respect[s] the format.” In contrast to earlier travelling sideshow “freak” acts, Bornstein claims that the financial structure of television results in more sympathetic and less controlling hosts, so that “the freaks have an opportunity to speak their own words—for the first time, and to a broad audience!”[35] Bornstein’s approach seems to influence the way this genre is received by interviewees, but it would be likewise reasonable to assume that Bornstein’s perspective is embraced by director Feder, given that his previous work was a collaboration with Bornstein that adapted one of her autobiographical books, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger*, for the screen.

To conclude this survey of *Disclosure*’s survey of mainstream trans visual history, I want to briefly address another, even older, work that generates joy and approval in *Disclosure*’s interviewees. The image—once more absent a real trans body—is of Bugs Bunny cross-dressing.

“Well, what did you expect in an opera?
A happy ending?”

Midway through the documentary, historian (and documentarian) Susan Stryker tells us,

“When I was growing up in the ‘60s, I watched a lot of television, watched a lot of movies, and the only, only positive representation I saw of anything transfeminine was Bugs Bunny [...] When Bugs Bunny was doing “girl,” Bugs Bunny was desirable and was powerful.” Lilly Wachowski likewise recalls that “Bugs Bunny [...] activated, in my trans imagination, this idea of transformation.”



Lilly Wachowski recalls her childhood glee at watching Bugs Bunny in feminine roles.



Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd duet to the music of Wagner's "Pilgrims' Chorus" in the Warner Bros. Merrie Melodies short "What's Opera Doc?" (1957).



Elmer and Bugs' romance comes to an abrupt end after the helmet falls off, revealing rabbit ears.

"I would always look back on that episode with a certain glee about the transformative aspects of it. And that Bugs looked, you know, really cute. I liked that part."

As she speaks, clips of the 1957 cartoon "What's Opera Doc?" play, depicting an armoured, Siegfried-esque Elmer Fudd duetting with a languid Bugs Bunny, bedecked in blonde plait, winged golden helmet, fluttering eyelashes, and matching hot pink skirt and eyeliner. Wachowski wryly acknowledges, all the same, that this cartoon could also be understood as representing "[t]he original trans panic defense in cartoon form," as we are shown a clip of Fudd in a murderous rage after Bugs-as-Brünnhilde's helmet falls off during a kiss, revealing rabbit ears.

This cartoon is one where Elmer seems to best Bugs, through his greater than usual magical powers of destruction. Upon discovering Bugs' finally lifeless corpse, however, Elmer is distraught with remorse, sobbing and cradling the body as he ascends a rocky precipice. *Disclosure* shares this last scene, which concludes in characteristically cartoonish fashion, with Bugs' head popping back up to address the audience: "Well, what did you expect in an opera? A happy ending?" In playfully commenting directly on genre, and genre's relation to audience expectations of emotional payoff, this conclusion brings the cartoon into the realm of satire. The failure of the cartoon to provide the conventionally comedic Looney Toons ending is highlighted, as is its failure to treat Wagner's original opera with appropriate dignity. Just like Bugs, Wachowski takes delight in the whimsical transformations that the cartoon's high burlesque parody makes possible, whilst shrugging knowingly at the violent generic framework which enable them. I propose that this artificial genre vacillation is not just a camp moment, and a "tender" moment of camp spectatorship (as Sontag puts it), but ultimately a compelling example of the ready alignment of a trans gaze with camp.

To return momentarily to *The Celluloid Closet*: for all of its worrying about tragic or villainous homosexuals, or the love that dare not speak its name on film, it cannot totally avoid producing camp. Russo's book, like the film, does not celebrate camp; Ellis is right to point this out. It explicitly addresses camp as a side effect of censorship.[36] Yet people consistently come away from that film with a new manner of enjoying camp in spite of this. Do we not now delight in *Ben-Hur* (1959) because, after watching Gore Vidal's interview, we can laugh at Charlton Heston's ridiculous inability to read the homoerotic subtext in which he was immersed? This is precisely the subversive potential of camp: it guarantees access to pleasure regardless of our political status. Cisnormativity and heteronormativity, in a camp framework, are not just the impossible ideals on which rest our precarious respectability or sovereignty. More importantly, they are forms of shallow and incurious spectatorship, which miss out on the enjoyment offered by all manner of objects outside rigidly defined gender-genre conventions.

This is what *Disclosure* seems to be hinting at in its few positive encounters with comedy. A lot of the documentary, however, is consumed with horror and drama—bad representations of trans figures, inevitably performed by cis actors, which are then refracted through the reactions of the interviewees to produce a sustained trauma narrative.



After dying, Bugs comes back to life to joke about audience expectations of genre.

The story of trans victimhood

In an interview with *Time* following the release of *Disclosure*, director Sam Feder voiced disappointment in the dramatic framework of trans life as represented by the Academy Award-winning Chilean film *A Fantastic Woman* (*Una mujer fantástica*) (2017):

“The film was not made for trans people; it was made for cis people to feel good about feeling bad for trans people. That’s a lens I’m often pushing up against, thinking about who is this for, and how is it supposed to make people feel and how are people reacting to that feeling. *A Fantastic Woman* was lauded but it was so disheartening to know that that’s where we still are, that the only access to allyship was through pity” [37]

All the same, it seems that consuming trans anguish is one of the main routes by which discerning cis audiences enjoy *Disclosure*. For example, *Variety*’s endorsement of the film, which is preceded by the tagline, “[a]n upbeat ‘The Celluloid Closet’-style survey of trans representation, Sam Feder’s look at gender expression on-screen is a cinephile’s delight, crowded with clips and queer readings of classic film and TV depictions,” draws readers in with a first paragraph promise that the film (and, by extension, review) will allow them to “imagine how agonizing it can be for those who gaze upon the screen searching for something they can recognize, only to find unflattering, inaccurate and scornful representations staring back.” [38] *The Guardian* likewise promises a “ghoulish” survey of trans representations, [39] while *The New York Times* tells us that

“it is the sheer abundance of banal, thoughtless cruelty that jolts, and *Disclosure* is careful to note how cruelty multiplies when transgender people are also black. With each successive trip to the grim vaults, the hard-won dignity of the film’s transgender speakers is brought into sharper and sharper relief.” [40]

Nor do reviews like this necessarily promise much in terms of an extension of respect by cis viewers for trans people (from the trans A-list to the average trans person) as the film hopes in its final minutes of narration. The *Variety* review, for example, celebrates how

“‘Disclosure’ achieves something so few other movies do: By showcasing strong, confident trans celebrities, the film offers a stark alternative to the homely portrayals audiences see when actors like John Lithgow (‘The World According to Garp’) or Chris Sarandon (‘Dog Day Afternoon’) are cast as trans characters.”

In these terms, trans celebrities (most famously successful for work in front of the camera, but all necessarily in a position of exaggerated economic and cultural capital) can be recognized as strong and confident, but emphasizing the need to avoid homeliness (rather than inauthenticity) hardly seems to be any real departure from the cisnormative gaze.

Isn’t this the very problem that Cox articulates at the end of the film? The type of glamor she represents might not do much to redeem the dignity of ordinary trans people, who by all means might exist much closer to the dowdiness of Sarandon or Lithgow. This might not be a problem that we should expect to be solved by trans stars so much as by more trans writers and directors, as *Disclosure* itself suggests through comments on *Pose* and its creative working environment by



Carmen Carrera pushes back against Katie Couric's questions about her genitals on *Katie* (2014).



Laverne Cox doubles down against Couric's tactless interview questions.



Jen Richards laughs that she "hate[s] the idea of disclosure."



Brian Michael Smith performs the gesture of grabbing his clothing....

Pose actor MJ Rodriguez and media maker/writer Tiq Milan.[41]

One could despair at the degree to which responses to *Disclosure* seem to enact the very delight in trans trauma that Feder has critiqued, but the film ultimately rescues us from this with prescient irony. *Disclosure*, the film's title, suggests a trans "coming out" of sorts, but in the context of narrative film and television it's reasonable to think of the term as not just an action done intentionally by a real trans person or a trans character, but also as any manner in which the screen might symbolically "disclose" knowledge of transness to an audience.

"I kind of hate the idea of disclosure"

Who discloses, to whom, and what is disclosed in *Disclosure*? Some of the interviews include a coming out of sorts, in that those interviewed make reference to their identity while describing their experiences related to trans media. There is also the brief focus on interviewee Sandra Caldwell's public disclosure, after a successful, decades-long career performing while stealth. In her interview for the documentary, Caldwell jokes that her "outing was in the *New York Times*"—referring to a 2017 article which profiled her. The scene appears in the last ten minutes; this story of the trans elder now living, working, and receiving fresh attention after outing herself in order to audition for a trans-specific theatre role as Mama Darleena in Philip Dawkin's *Charm* implies that things have changed, and not just for trans youth. Yet the *New York Times* story itself, and then subsequent attention from "ABC and NBC, and, yes, Fox" could also suggest that there is greater media interest in particular types of trans autobiographical narratives than in the actual work of trans performers. I have found no subsequent media coverage of any more recent work by Caldwell on stage or screen. However, *Disclosure* quite self-consciously avoids centering the typical drive to demand that trans subjects make a full, satisfying account of themselves and their gender. That type of storytelling is instead problematized and historicized.

When we are shown scenes of figures like Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinberg, and Reno appearing in varying salacious daytime television scenarios, the interviewees are appreciative of the visibility it created and the possibilities it opened for them, while critical of the objectifying cisgender gaze that engendered these moments. We have progressed, the film shows, through the increasing agency of trans celebrities to push back against this form of scrutiny. This narrative is represented through an excerpt of two 2014 interviews by Katie Couric, wherein actresses Carmen Carrera and Laverne Cox both firmly but gracefully reject Couric's line of questioning about their genital configurations. In the subsequent interview Couric apologizes for her tactlessness; we see a sort of reconciliation and Couric can be proud of her nascent solidarity.

The documentary's title occurs only twice in its dialog, and both instances are part of a comment that actress and writer Jen Richards makes at the midpoint of the film. Richards brings up the term in order to disavow the usefulness of disclosure as a concept. In an interview clip (which is intercut with footage from *Without a Trace* (2005) and *Picket Fences* (1992)) she tells us,

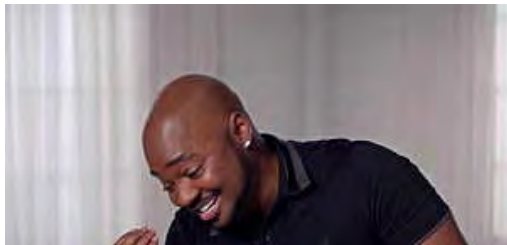
"When you start watching trans clips back-to-back you see how often all the people around the trans character feel betrayed or lied to. But frankly, I kind of hate the idea of disclosure in the sense that it presupposes that there is something to disclose. It reinforces their assumption that there is a secret that is hidden and that I have a responsibility to tell others, and that presupposes that the other person might have some kind of issue or problem with what's to be disclosed. And that their feelings matter more than mine."



.... and ripping it open to out himself.



Disclosure uses a brief clip from *Yentl* (1983) (along with others) to illustrate the pattern of stripping trans characters -- revealing the body in order to disclose a hidden identity or past.



Smith breaks into laughter because "instead of having a conversation... they thought that was the way to go."

Richards critiques the pressure for actual trans people to out themselves as a demand of trans politics, or normative ethics, or as a token of honesty or intimacy in some other sense. It makes sense, however, to extend this critique to the way popular media depicts the rewarding or punishing of trans figures for the relative transparency of their embodiment of gender, or the manner in which it is narrativized. To defend passing among trans people or characters verges on abandoning the call for explicit, positive, and authentic trans representation. If the only characters that can be recognized by a cis audience as legitimate trans characters are those who make their gender unambiguously legible to the camera, if not other characters, then how much understanding or empathy can we really expect to be generated?

This, along with the discussion of scenes in films where trans characters are dramatically revealed as trans—either by their own volition or by another's, often through some gesture of sudden disrobing—suggests the influence of trans scholar Talia Mae Bettcher's writing on "Appearance, Reality, and Gender Deception," where she argues,

"Surely the very notion of 'honesty is the best policy' needs to be rethought once we recognise that truth-telling is impossible? To what extent does the tactic of self-revelation, when represented as unproblematically valuable, require of transpeople an oppressively impossible honesty? Surely secrecy, duplicity, and deception ought to be recognised as important tactics in not only personal survival, but in resistant politics more generally. Indeed one might also argue that given the options, successfully passing in the category of one's preference as 'nontrans' is actually the only available strategy in which, if one can successfully pull it off, one can actually claim authenticity in a world that denies it to us. By contrast, 'coming out' and 'self-revelation' appear to play right into the problematic context of 'discovery of the hidden reality' itself connected to accusation of deception. It is little wonder, therefore, that this account is in danger of re-inscribing the very transphobia it fails to explain."

If *Disclosure* treats its own subject matter with such irony, and ends by questioning the practical value of increased mainstream trans representation, why labor over it so? I will address this question, and the object of *Disclosure*'s camp critique, by turning to one further scene with Jen Richards, where she voices the film's most ambivalent reaction to trans media that is otherwise presented as positive.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Humouring trans futures



A father in a support group for parents of trans youth compares the relationship to "living with a unicorn" on the reality TV series *I Am Cait* (2014).



He testifies to the "honor" one should feel to be in the presence of someone "so brave, so cool, so close to themselves."



Other parents of trans children appreciate this act of parental devotion and affirmation.

What does the ultimate trans ally look like? A father, gesturing emphatically. His eyes are wide with wonder as he looks up from his chair in the support group circle and into the cameras of Caitlin Jenner's reality show crew, affirming how fabulously fortunate he is to have a trans child. He tells the group surrounding him, and reality TV cameras,

"If you have a transgender kid, you are living with a unicorn, an amazing human being. To be next to someone so brave, so cool, so close to themselves. The reality is Avery has been on point from age two, apparently. Know what I mean? So, the reality is it's such an honor."

Subsequent shots capture parents around the room, smiling and nodding piously, and a woman sitting a few seats away, interjects "It's so true what he's saying." The scene, near the documentary's end, is the only one besides the final scene and the scene on Bugs Bunny that invokes the truly fantastic. In the father's heavenward gaze, and unicorn analogy, we bypass the mundane realities of nuclear family squabbles and a broader culture of transphobia. This is not to say this is the dynamic of the real family pictured in the film, but rather the narrative end to which their image is applied.

Notably, this is a rare moment that is almost completely absent trans people. It is a scene taken from the fourth episode of the trans Kardashian empire spin-off *I Am Cait* (2014), depicting a support group-type setting for cisgender parents of trans children that Jenner visits, hosted by Chaz Bono. The very brief clip included in *Disclosure* is framed by the much lengthier and emotional response it evokes in Jen Richards, despite her stated distaste for Jenner's persona and politics. She recounts,

"I was watching this father, and it just... it hurt because... I had to be okay with my mom saying, 'I will never call you Jen because Jen murdered my son.' I had to— I had to be okay with that in order to survive myself, you know? [...] I have to deal with those things. Like, I have to live with those things. And I have to make that okay. I have to understand their position and be okay with it. And when I saw that father go so much further than I thought was even possible, it hurt, I couldn't bear it, because then, all of a sudden, all those people who couldn't accept me, when I knew it was possible to go beyond acceptance [...] No one's looked at me that way. How could I look at me that way? I had to see it. And now that I have, I want that."

Richards narrates a profound sense of loss in her own life due to the ruptures of sociality that her closest family and friends enact in response to her perceived gender transgressions. Her sense of self emerges in the absence of "acceptance," and yet is also organized around desire for this "love and respect and awe" that are "beyond acceptance." Richards and *Disclosure* gesture towards the possibility that this reality TV moment (or moments like it) delivers a utopic image that will ultimately produce the better society it promises. This is not really that far from the positive representation project for which *The Celluloid Closet* has received so



The scene of devoted parents going "beyond acceptance" in a support group touches Richards deeply.



The documentary lingers over Richards' painful pause, after she admits this image leaves her feeling a lack in her own life.

much criticism. Yet *Disclosure* exceeds the approach of the earlier documentary through its greater emphasis on the varied emotions of its interviewees, and in this takes us in a direction that is more acutely ironic.

The irony in this moment is primarily that the trans child in question—like the unicorn figure with which Avery is associated—is wholly absent from the film's diegesis. If possibly present elsewhere in the *I Am Cait* episode, it is very brief and Avery is silent. In the original context in which the clip appeared, the scene is juxtaposed with the partial resolution of issues that emerged when Jenner voiced embarrassing or damaging criticisms of her castmates/family in the interview that accompanied her infamous *Vanity Fair* cover. The recap published at the time by *Entertainment Weekly* therefore reasonably concludes that "it's obvious that Caitlyn isn't here to help these people. They're here to help her become a more generous parent." Jenner must not let her newfound access to femininity or fame come at the cost of family-professional loyalty. As *Entertainment Weekly* puts it,

"their family needs a united front so that they can understand each other. [Kim Kardashian's] family first message is so human, you might forget that we're talking about the Kardashians here." [42] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

The resolution of trans humanity through family is understandable, given the widely-recognized trauma of family rejection of queer children, yet anyone well enough versed in queer theory might catch a whiff here of the conservatism inherent in reproductive futurism. As queer theorist Lee Edelman argues, reproductive futurism is an inherently reactionary form of politics and narrative that invests in the child as figure, in order to ultimately maintain a future for both the oedipal family structure and the neoliberal state. At the conclusion of *Disclosure*, we are not dealing with a future occupied by actual trans children, but rather "the child, that is, compelled to image, for the satisfaction of adults, an imaginary fullness thought to want, and thus to want for, nothing." [43]

By presenting the trans child as not only marvellously novel but also superhumanly self-knowing and static in their remarkable gender incongruity, the trans child can function (somewhat surprisingly) to stabilize the family. Through accommodating and loving the fantastical trans child, the image of unconditional parental love is reified. More importantly, gender divergence is contained—not just because the child can be understood as androgynous but stable and certain, but because the inherent uncertainty and instability of the parents is surreptitiously made cisgender. The emotional overinvestment (displayed by both Richards and Avery's father) in this trans child whose unshakeable self-knowledge can deliver a future that is simultaneously exciting and free of trauma or conflict betrays itself as not a true resolution but rather a (re)productive fantasy. The trans child is undepictable and figurative.

This type of response, where trans difference (and particularly that of gender-nonconforming/gender-creative children) is engaged with as something marvelous or delightfully surprising, has started to seem like the only remaining way that a trans story can appear unambiguously positive. Mermaid figures, in particular, have an affinity with trans child narratives, trans youth service organizations, and perhaps also transfeminine children themselves, as Nat Hurley has convincingly demonstrated. While the parents, doctors, and caregivers of trans children are reassured by how mermaids manage to blend bodily hybridity with innocent, conventional, stable, and knowable femininity, a meaning which aligns relatively well with the narrative of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), trans children, on the other hand, have good reason to be drawn to the sublimated

narrative of agency and abjection that is expressed in a much more brutal (and imperialist) form in Hans Christian Andersen's version of the story.[44]

The lingering trans fae at the end of *Disclosure* serve, in a similar way to the mermaid fantasy figure, as a reconciliation of an ambiguous body with white femininity, youth and innocence. If we assume a liberal progress narrative is being expressed, both verbally and visually, the crowd of fairies might serve as this type of putatively positive image, projected as the cutting edge or near future of trans representation, and, further, as the not-yet-disclosed. Presumably, trans people who will come out into this world of more and improved positive trans representation and the better, less traumatizing world that must surely accompany it, are just waiting to dazzle us with unisex high fashion, drag makeup, strange prosthetics, and magic.

The last scene, as it turns out, is excerpted from the second season finale of *The Magicians* (2015-2020). The central character in these shots, the Fairy Queen, is played by Candis Cayne, but her look for the role is so heavily stylized that she is nearly unrecognizable. Despite the praise Cayne has received (including in *Disclosure*) for breaking ground with her recurring role as trans mistress Carmelita (2007-2008) on *Dirty Sexy Money*, there has not been nearly the same attention (in *Disclosure*, or elsewhere) to her 2017-2018 role as the Fairy Queen. This may be partly because there's nothing in the series that serves as a realistic reference to trans life that would fulfill the demands of representation—like a transition story or physical “evidence” of change. There's no reason Cayne couldn't be understood as playing a cis character.

Attempting to deliver a positive fantasy where trans people exist as a source of wonder for a cis majority without our bodies, practices, or relationships becoming subject to bio/necropolitical repression (and the collective trauma it produces) must fail. On a surface level, the Fairy Queen and all her subjects might be understood as queer or gender-nonconforming, inasmuch as they represent a particular, narrow image of androgyny: relatively thin and hairless, with chalky, smooth, skin and loose, but vaguely aristocratic, garb. Reproductive futurism, and the assimilative politics that accompany it, is not just about the microcosm of sexual reproduction or the heteronormative nuclear family but also about the reproduction of so many other cultural norms.

Yet these fairies don't only serve as the disappointing surface realization of a good trans subject, they also can usher in a deeper level of negativity—much like mermaids. In the context of *The Magicians*, like many other narratives inspired by fairy tales, they are antagonistic and much more frighteningly inhuman. The clip included in *Disclosure*, in its original context, actually depicts the arrival of a formerly invisible invading force, who serve as the major villains for the first half of the third season. The fairies coerce and exploit the kingdom's rulers behind the scenes; they attempt to geoengineer the land in order to plant their eggs; they steal children from human parents and replace them with difficult and disloyal ones. The serial narrative arc would fall apart under close scrutiny if it were taken as an earnest extended allegory of trans oppression. However, in the intertextual context of *Disclosure*, the reference to this campy villain role (and the latent negativity of fairy tales in general) subtly undermines the fantasy of trans futures as a strange but undisruptive addendum to existing social structures, and the sense that the documentary celebrates a progression towards authenticity, transparency, and positivity in trans representation.

How to escape the overdetermined trans narratives of traumatic abjection and heroic resilience? The strategy of *Disclosure* is to directly and excessively affirm all the conflicting and impossible things these genres demand and thus ascend to the realm of camp. Let us finally be, as Sontag puts it, “too much.”[45] By

abandoning the pretense of serious representation and finally letting the trans character appear as purely figurative, we might acquire the distance necessary in order to enjoy it and to better recognize the origins of the desires that engendered it in the first place. This is a trans gaze pulling back to see what object we have become while passing through mainstream genres. In other words, irony. Yet *Disclosure* doesn't whole-heartedly commit to the acidic, critical tone that makes satire (or, more specifically, Juvenalian satire) easily recognizable; for this reason it makes sense to use the term camp and to avoid reducing it to simple queer satire. The structure of satire, as influentially formulated by literary critic Northrop Frye, requires both "wit or humour" and "an object of attack." He therefore claims that

"[a]ttack without humour, or pure denunciation, thus forms one of the boundaries of satire; humour without attack, the humour of pure gaiety or exuberance, is the other." [46]

Disclosure does not go so far as to denounce the politics of positive representation, or the investment cis audiences might have in trans images. It gently questions the effects of this phenomenon, but in a manner that is much more tender.

The utopic desire that *Disclosure* articulates, it articulates sincerely. In the grave, uncomfortably long monologue responding to the *I Am Cait* scene featuring Avery's father, Jen Richards devastatingly and methodically outlines the manners in which her own life has been marked by a traumatic lack of the unconditional and ungendered love that he represents. Her final comment, "I had to see it. And now that I have, I want that" is heartbreaking. Viewing the televisual promise of this trans-familial good life, even when we recognize its inevitable failures, leaves a bittersweet ache. So perhaps trans camp isn't necessarily about destroying the object of satire so much as displaying and testing the other's fantasies as much as one's own have been tested.

While (as I've mentioned) Halberstam has critiqued the conventions of the "camp archive" in relation to the stronger affects of other forms of queer negativity, we can understand why the trans relation to parental love, childhood agency, and the possibility of reconciliation or acceptance prompts a relatively subtle form of intervention. *Disclosure* enacts this, among the other ironic gestures that I've noted, with its final flail towards a fantastical future that can only fail to be serious. The gang of pallid, ageless, and androgynous figures at the film's end can be understood as the promised, magically resilient trans children that will both preserve and enliven our world, if we can only open the gates of representation. If we understand that this future cannot be taken seriously, and that these images of the not-yet-disclosed trans child are in some sense a ridiculous, defensive fantasy, then the only children that we have left to turn to are the children who did have a future—desires and trauma and all—becoming Stryker, Cox, Wachowski, and others. Instead of mining trans lives for tragedy, or essentializing trans difference to romanticize social cohesion, *Disclosure* teases us to risk enjoying gender and genre-crossing without the safety of disclosure. Without that, the common ground is camp grounds.

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Notes

1. D. A. Miller, "Sontag's Urbanity," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (Routledge, 1993), 212–20. Miller claims it was "the essay that did the most to make her early reputation" (213) and criticizes both it and Sontag's 1989 book *AIDS and its Metaphors* for erasing gay subjects. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (Macmillan, 2001 [1966]), 201–2.
3. Marissa Brostoff, "Notes on Caitlyn, or Genre Trouble: On the Continued Usefulness of Camp as Queer Method," *Differences* 28, no. 3 (2017): 7. See 2–4 on theoretical reception of camp, but I'd also like to acknowledge that Brostoff's reading of *I Am Cait* has substantially influenced my own interpretation of the effect of excerpts from Jenner's show included in *Disclosure*.
4. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 109–10.
5. Esther Newton, "Selection from Mother Camp," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (Routledge, 2013), 128.
6. Ellis Hanson, "Introduction," *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (Duke University Press, 1999), 7.
7. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (Harper & Row, 1981).
8. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, *The Celluloid Closet* (Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 1995).
9. Sam Feder, *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*, (Netflix, 2020).
10. I discuss the influence of Serano and Bettcher in some detail below. Halberstam and Snorton's influences are suggested by comments from interviewees on *Boys Don't Cry* (1999). This article is by no means a complete map of theoretical influences, however.
11. Peter Debruge, "'Disclosure' on Netflix: Film Review," *Variety*, June 19, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/reviews/disclosure-review-netflix-trans-lives-on-screen-1234642803/>.
12. Lauren Berlant, "Genre Flailing," *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2018), <http://capaciousjournal.com/article/genre-flailing/>.
13. Katy Steinmetz, "The Transgender Tipping Point," *Time*, May 29, 2014, <https://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/>. [[return to page 2](#)]
14. Steinmetz.

15. Steinmetz.

16. While I quote Huxtable and Hamblin's interview comments below, drawing attention to their alignment with Cox's and Feder's comments, another framework which is quite relevant (and articulated in a more typically theoretical form) is that of trans necropolitics, as described by Snorton C. Riley and Jin Haritaworn. "Trans Necropolitics," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Aizura Aren and Stryker Susan (Routledge, 2013), 66–76.

17. Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable, "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (MIT Press Cambridge, MA, 2017), 39–56.

18. Lexi Adsit et al., "Representation and Its Limits," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, 2017, 191–200.

19. Sam Feder and Alexandra Juhasz, "A Conversation on Trans Activist Media," *Jump Cut*, no. 57 (Fall 2016), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-Feder-JuhaszTransActivism/text.html>.

20. "Disclosure (2020)," *Rotten Tomatoes*, accessed November 5, 2020, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/disclosure_2020_2.

21. Christi Carras, "Laverne Cox Recounts Transphobic Attack in L.A.: 'Never Fails to Be Shocking,'" *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-11-30/laverne-cox-transphobic-attack-instagram-live>.

22. Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, "After Trans Studies," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2019): 104–5.

23. Lauren Berlant, "Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (December 12, 2016): 305–40, <https://doi.org/10.1086/689657>.

24. Yohana Desta, "Eddie Redmayne Defends J.K. Rowling Against 'Absolutely Disgusting' Backlash," *Vanity Fair*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/09/eddie-redmayne-jk-rowling-transphobia>. [return to page 3]

25. Marjorie Garber, "Black and White TV: Cross-Dressing The Color-Line," in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (Routledge, 1992), 298.

26. Kevin Cook, *Flip: The Inside Story of Tv's First Black Superstar* (Penguin, 2013). Ebook.

27. Marjorie Garber, "Black and White TV: Cross-Dressing The Color-Line," in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (Routledge, 1992), 298-9.

28. Lee Edelman, "The Future Is Kid Stuff," in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

29. LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, "Fat Spirit: Obesity, Religion, and Sapphimmabel in Contemporary Black Film," *Fat Studies* 2, no. 1 (2013): 56–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2013.744270>.

30. Racquel J. Gates, "Introduction," in *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Duke University Press, 2018), 16.

31. Racquel J. Gates, "Introduction," in *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Duke University Press, 2018), 12.
32. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 37.
33. Serano, 37-8.
34. I say recorded, because it seems important to note that as badly as talk shows might meet our expectations for documentary work, they nevertheless produce trans records. I've certainly come across homemade videocassette recordings of such broadcasts in my own work in personal archives, and I have no reason to believe these attachments to preserved 'trash TV' as valuable proof-of-trans-life are especially unusual. The especially rough quality of the *Jerry Springer* footage included in *Disclosure* helps invoke the preservation techniques (and sentiment) of such non-professional collecting. [[return to page 4](#)]
35. Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (Routledge, 1994), 129.
36. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (Harper & Row, 1981), 26.
37. Suyin Haynes, "9 Moments That Show the Pain and Progress of Transgender Representation Onscreen," *Time*, accessed October 18, 2020, <https://time.com/5855071/Disclosure-netflix-transgender-representation/>.
38. Peter Debruge, "'Disclosure' on Netflix: Film Review," *Variety*, June 19, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/reviews/Disclosure-review-netflix-trans-lives-on-screen-1234642803/>.
39. Adrian Horton, "Disclosure: Behind Laverne Cox's Netflix Documentary on Trans Representation," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jun/18/Disclosure-laverne-cox-netflix-documentary-trans-representation>.
40. Teo Bugbee, "'Disclosure' Review: A Transgender Lens on Film and TV History," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/movies/Disclosure-review-a-transgender-lens-on-film-and-tv-history.html>.
41. The special praise Milan, along with actor Eliot Fletcher, reserves for erotic scenes in the Ryan Murphy-created series suggests the risk of overlooking pornography itself in surveys of mainstream trans representation and its impacts, especially given *Pose*'s positive working conditions are contrasted with the exploitation of the documentary subjects of *Paris is Burning* (many of whom engage in sex work), but that question deserves at least its own essay.
42. Melissa Maerz, "'I Am Cait' Recap: Kim Kardashian Vents about the 'Vanity Fair' Cover," *EW.com*, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://ew.com/ Recap/i-am-cait-season-1-episode-4/>. [[return to page 5](#)]
43. Lee Edelman, "The Future Is Kid Stuff," in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), 1–31.
44. Nat Hurley, "The Little Transgender Mermaid: A Shape-Shifting Tale," in *Seriality and Texts for Young People* (Springer, 2014), 258–80.
45. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (Macmillan, 2001 [1966]), 196.

46. Northrop Frye, "The Nature of Satire," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1944): 76.

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Queer TV performances that time forgot

review by [Katharine Mussellam](#)

Quinlan Miller, *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Television History* (Duke University Press, 2019), 220 pages.

The 1950s are frequently associated with the white picket fence domesticity of U.S. suburbs and the rigid binary gender roles that go along with such an imaginary, and ideological, formation. Popular television shows of the period, such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Dick van Dyke Show*, are typically associated with this heteronormative constellation of images. In *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Television History*, Quinlan Miller challenges many viewers' and historians' perception that television programs from the 1950s and 60s, because of the cultural context in which they were made, rarely contain examples of gender nonconformity or queer characters. Miller contests the assumption that only from the 1970s onwards did television allow queer representation. Miller points to various examples of camp performances in television programs from the 50s and 60s to reveal that queer gender played an important role in sitcom production. Reconsidering elements of sitcoms dismissed and obscured by previous scholarly work, Miller re-examines and re-exposes gender variant performances. Through discussions of TV episodes and archival material, *Camp TV* provides a detailed picture of the production and cultural contexts of queer gender appearance in sitcoms, ranging from non-conforming dress and gestures to critiques of heterosexual marriage.

As a work that revisits television history, *Camp TV* develops arguments not mainly through plots of television programmes, but through a focus on performers, production strategies, and genre forms. While Miller discusses the plots of some episodes, much of the text is based on other elements of the comedy series that make up the subject matter of the book. Just as sitcoms developed from sketch comedy in variety shows—comedy “bits” without a long-running story – *Camp TV*'s examples are often fleeting moments of camp performances within a series and facilitated by its structure. As Miller writes, sitcoms have standardized narrative patterns, repeated in each episode, that inflect rather than develop characters. Each week these characters, often based on stock types, repeat the same inflections and camp performances laid out by the sitcom structure. Just as gender performance is something that is repeated again and again within the frameworks set up by society, sitcoms are based on a structure that functions as a “simple and repeatable frame” for all manner of gags, one-liners, and other comedy bits that can include queer gender (22). Furthermore, not only the plots of television programmes create this, Miller states, but also the industry framework that creates the programmes themselves. Miller's text frequently references relations between the content of television programmes and that framework.



Mary Tyler Moore, Dick van Dyke, and Larry Matthews as the Petrie family in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*.



Precursors to sitcoms, variety shows, often featured camp performances, such as Milton Berle's drag performances on *Texaco Star Theater* (and *The Milton Berle Show*).



Richard Deacon (right), one of several camp character actors of the 50s and 60s.



Ann B. Davis (left) and Bob Cummings in a still from *The Bob Cummings Show*. Both performers cultivated eccentric camp personae in their TV roles and appearances.

Another focus in Miller's text is on the personalities of television performers, both in their roles in sitcoms and on other television programmes, and their appearances in print media publicity. The television programmes in which many actors, particularly character actors, appeared did not have explicitly queer plots or contain queer themes. However, Miller writes that their personae as eccentric people conveyed a genderqueer-ness that continued beyond the characters they portrayed into the wider media landscape. Miller incorporates these various media and the publicity appearances of performers – such as Richard Deacon, Kaye Ballard, Bob Cummings, and Nancy Kulp – to demonstrate the pervasiveness of camp in television and related media. Camp performers were part of the structure of television and their role in enacting a standardized kind of eccentricity extended beyond television to related publicity. Miller uses this information to demonstrate that even if not explicitly categorized as genderqueer, the portrayal of these performers as eccentric across media was part of their appeal to viewers. Because eccentric celebrities attract audiences for being funny and strange, they affirm “the appeal of stigma” even if they are also made ridiculous for their difference (12). While television of the time appears to uphold white heteronormativity, Miller demonstrates that celebrating gender non-conformity was part of how television shows were promoted to audiences and remained popular.

Using such a broad focus means that Miller's text differs from other writing about queer television. Instead of only doing a textual analysis of the themes, plots, and characters within the shows themselves, Miller analyses the entire media landscape of the time. By referring to archival materials from various media appearing in the same time period, Miller provides insight into how these various media appearances, taken as a whole, worked together to create the camp personae of the performers discussed in *Camp TV*. With this framework, Miller discusses how queer performers were not exceptions in a generally heteronormative social and media world, but instead suggests that they and their queerness were pervasive. Miller does not just discuss television programmes and performers in terms of responding to, or being created by, the social climate of the time. Rather, the book explains how the structure and the performers of sitcoms at the time created a media landscape that frequently included genderqueer camp. In an important contribution to scholarly methodology for studying television, Miller analyses television as part of an interconnected media world that existed and continues to exist today, especially linking promotion and advertising to the production and forms of television.

Miller traces how the formulaic structure of television sitcoms is what makes the format conducive to producing camp performances and queer gender. Because sitcoms often feature eccentric characters with “idiosyncratic gender expression” and in ironic couplings, the makers of sitcoms “created queer gender by developing tropes of ambiguously believable romantic interest and sexual devotion” (28). In the first chapter, Miller discusses the history of camp on TV and the evolution of the sitcom from variety shows. Through several examples of camp performance and queer gender in these variety skits, such as those featuring Milton Berle and Ed Wynn, Miller demonstrates the queer gender possibilities of sitcoms. Skits on these programs often parodied gender expression and norms of heterosexual relationships and breakups from films, as well as parodying famous eccentric personalities and drag performance.



Nancy Kulp's characters, such as that of Jane Hathaway on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, stood in opposition to normative femininity in her aggressive pursuit of men (left) and physical appearance, parodying those norms in an episode featuring a beauty competition (right).

Camp performances could also bring attention to the construction of heteronormative gender norms. One particularly interesting example Miller describes is from an episode of the show *My Friend Irma*, in which Irma learns how to perform feminine gestures from the European man Kropotkin, who also relates other ways in which his character does things generally considered feminine. Decades before Judith Butler's writing on the performativity of gender, this skit points out that it is a social construction for certain gestures to be feminine. These gestures and behaviours are "cultivated through style and experimentation, with an unsettled relation to bodies and looks," and they are not necessarily "a natural possession of white women" who are supposedly the bearers of that femininity (34). While perhaps not discussed in those terms, sitcom producers understood, on some level, gender performativity.

For media scholars, a general understanding of the time period covered in *Camp TV* operates under the assumption that because of norms and expectations at the time, creators would not have been able to get away with queer performance. This is only partly true according to Miller. Television studios and producers devised regulations, not dissimilar the Hayes Code for films, to "clean up" television – i.e. remove potentially offensive material – and make it respectable according to white heterosexual norms. However, camp parody that included banter with multiple meanings allowed for sexual jokes and queer gender to continue. Miller also notes that television technology at the time also allowed for camp to circulate without censorship at the broadcast stage. Even if certain concepts would have been discouraged at the developmental stages, television-recording devices were not commercially available to audiences, and therefore they could not record live programs to play back at a later date. This gave camp the potential to circulate free from censorship once it made it to broadcast.

Much of the second chapter of the book focuses on *The Bob Cummings Show* and the persona created for the show's titular male lead by his wife Mary Elliott Cummings, who also shaped the other characters in the show. Miller frames this discussion through camp's circulation in Hollywood, where Cummings' television programs were produced and set. Miller refers to Susan Sontag's definition of camp as "how to be dandy in the age of mass culture" (60) and also how camp style operated as a way for queer individuals to express that queerness in a way not "intelligible to straights" (61). However, while not necessarily intelligible as queer to everyone, Hollywood still became fluent in camp vernacular, which



BOB CUMMINGS looks unaccountably grim amid the holiday charms of Joe Harrison, Jackie Evans and Norma Brooks on the Bob Cummings Show, on view Thursday nights at 8 in Channel 2.

Publicity shot for the *Bob Cummings Show* that draws attention to Bob's status as a single man, despite being surrounded by women.



Mary Tyler Moore (right) as Laura Petrie in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, whom Miller describes as a "housewife labourer notoriously wearing capri pants."

allows another person to know that someone is queer without being told that information directly. The eccentricity of camp became associated with Hollywood itself and coincided with queer gender in *The Bob Cummings Show*, which was set in Hollywood. Miller's descriptions of Bob Cummings' camp is as a trait that is not particularly indirect, but still contains implicit critiques and meanings. The Bob and Margaret characters are two single people who live together; their characters play out scenes that question sexist norms of heteronormativity. On one level, this is done through Bob's serial monogamy and his sister's disinterest in dating and marriage. Bob's profession in show business also produces comedy related to gender non-conformity. One episode Miller discusses in detail involves Bob's including the purchase of a women's garment in his tax audit. This garment is "shocking" in both its colour and the fact that Bob bought it. While not particularly strange for someone in show business or for a married man to buy, it raises questions because he is single and has no partner whom to give it as a gift. Miller describes Bob's character as genderqueer, since he "rarely disavowed interests construed as feminine according to social protocols for heteronormative behaviour" (81), which Miller ascribes to part of the show's success.

This rejection of conformity to heteronormativity by Bob as well as other characters in the sitcom was also part of Bob Cummings' offscreen persona. In a discussion just as interesting as that about gender performances in the show itself, Miller writes that Mary Elliott Cummings was highly involved in the construction of Bob's persona and also in how the media discussed and photographed them. Miller describes a feature in the *Los Angeles Examiner* depicting the couple in which Bob performs camp gestures and wears a bright green suit. Miller also describes another feature picturing Mary Elliott holding an Emmy that was in fact awarded to Bob, as if she were its rightful owner. In another photograph, Mary Elliott holds the Emmy while Bob is identified last in the captions after others in the foreground, suggesting he is the least important of everyone pictured despite having the title role on the *Cummings Show*. Along with descriptions of Mary Elliott's calm and professional persona in contrast to his, the way she and Bob are depicted in these photographs upend gendered assumptions about authority and behaviour, with Mary Elliott taking the typically male role and credit that usually goes to male creators. Since Miller spends quite a bit of time contextualizing and discussing these images, it is unfortunate that they, nor any frame captures of the *Cummings Show*, appear in the book. Miller's descriptions are fairly evocative, but it would have been helpful to be able to see what Miller describes as pertinent information to the chapter.

Following the in-depth discussion of queer gender in the *Cummings Show*, Miller moves on in chapter three to discuss how *The Dick Van Dyke Show* critiques heteronormativity; such a perspective runs contrary to many critics' analyses and audiences' memories of the show. Miller focuses on the character of Laura Petrie (Mary Tyler Moore) who is not only a wife but also a former dancer. According to Miller, this makes Laura exist in a liminal role, partway between home and office spaces, that breaks from gender norms. Miller also discusses the Sal character (Rose Marie), a member of the team who works with Rob Petrie; Sal's role often functions as a commentary on norms of monogamy and the expectation that a woman's greatest goal in life is marriage. While Sal receives taunts by other characters for her string of boyfriends, she usually has a witty retort instead of constantly wallowing in spinster-hood.



Rose Marie (centre) as Sal in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*.



Greta suggests to Peter, "Pretend you're married!" in the opening sequence of *Occasional Wife*, drawing attention to the visual signification of a wedding ring.

The various men Sal dates are a source of camp because they are eccentric characters played by character actors (whom Miller returns to throughout the text as performers of queer gender), as well as because of their relationships to Sal and their roles in the show's plots. For example, one of Sal's boyfriends is a man named Eddie who is feminine in expression in contrast to Sal's "public top behaviour." Miller says this couple "double-crosses cis expectations" in relation to their individual gender expressions and their roles in the relationship (102). In another episode's plot, Sal dates a man who is both an undertaker and married, but it is unclear which is worse about him. His character's presence leads Laura and Rob Petrie to discuss open relationships as something valid and accepted by some. Their conversation suggests that the alternative, monogamous heterosexuality, could make someone "square." Sal's strings of boyfriends occasion multiple commentaries on heterosexuality and what could be accepted, instead of the show's simply representing Sal as a woman who fails at reaching proper, socially-sanctioned fulfillment. Miller contrasts this perspective on Sal with that of other authors who focus on episodes that portray her as unhappy with being single. Miller points out that many other episodes have a different message about Sal's situation altogether, and cannot be weighted less than those that do present a more normative view of women's relationships. Like many of the camp performances in *Camp TV*, the normative can exist alongside the subversive.

In the same chapter, Miller writes about other programs that dealt with queer gender in relation to singlehood and married life in camp ways. One program, *Occasional Wife*, both is and is not about married life, as the title implies. The principal characters in the show are two single people, Greta and Peter, who both pretend to be married in their respective workplaces: Greta because a wedding ring on her finger prevents harassment and unwanted advances, Peter because of biases in choosing to hire married people. This premise alone critiques gender norms related to marriage status, but as Miller notes, camp is produced through the way that many jokes in the series "consist of the characters voicing traditional complaints about their marriage, which does not actually exist, a contradiction the writers used to fuel double entendres about dating and sex" (119). The two characters frequently bicker, which points out that the complaints about marriage are considered evidence that they are in one. While not explicitly stated in Miller's text, this commentary in *Occasional Wife* is but one example of the commentary on marriage in other shows of the period, such as *I Love Lucy*, where married couples are constantly verbally sparring and complaining about their partners. Miller's argument suggests a critical reading for these moments.

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Publicity still for *Occasional Wife* hinting at the secrecy involved in the characters' relationship.



Peter Kastner as Timmy in *The Ugliest Girl in Town*.

Miller also points out that the double life of the characters in *Occasional Wife* not only displays camp through commentary on expectations about married couples, but also portrays an experience that can resonate with gay and trans experiences. Many 2SLGBTQ individuals are only open about their gender or sexuality in certain contexts and to certain people, living their own double lives. With the legalization of marriage equality in various countries around the world in the twenty-first century, though beyond the scope of the historical period studied by Miller in this book, it would be an interesting follow-up to this study to discuss whether the expectation that married couples bicker and complain about each other holds for portrayals of same-gender spouses and how this might be portrayed on television, even if the element of secrecy would figure in different ways than in a series from the 60s.

Miller continues on to point out that the parody of marriage that Greta and Peter enact exposes white normative conceptions of gender in the 60s. These include an attempt to recreate an idealized version of a meal prepared by a wife as pictured in a home décor magazine, and the monetary compensation that Peter provides Greta for acting as his wife. These contrast, and draw attention to, the demanding but largely unpaid and unnoticed labour of ordinary wives, as well as the imbalance of power and wealth in many marriages. Miller notes other plotlines related to the problems encountered in this performed marriage by others around them – Greta's dating life is not dissimilar to Sal's on the *Dick Van Dyke Show* – and plots surrounding single characters dealing with sexual assault. By illuminating these commentaries in the same chapter as analyses of *Dick Van Dyke*, Miller points out more than one way that 1960s sitcoms could critique norms of marriage and single life that still seem fresh from a twenty-first century perspective. Even today, in many sitcoms, true to the original definition of comedy, marriage and babies are often the ultimate goal and destination for many characters.

In the fourth and final chapter, Miller continues to shift focus from mainly discussing shows fondly remembered as classics to another more obscure and short-lived series from the 1960s, *The Ugliest Girl in Town*. Influenced by the popularity of Twiggy, whom Miller describes as a figure with a gender non-conforming image, *Girl* follows a character named Tim who, in pursuit of a love interest, becomes a popular female model named Timmy in order to spend time with her. This premise meant that the creators of the show had to negotiate cis norms of gender while creating a successful series. They had to use camp, as “euphemism, subtlety, and intertextual reference to communicate through taboo,” to discuss gender non-conformity and homosexuality (136). The creators faced pressure to simplify their portrayals of women and make Tim a tougher character, in accordance with accepted norms of masculinity, even though the very concept of the series challenged those norms.

The series' subject matter corresponds to the style of filming used in the show to align with subcultures of the time, similar to the visual style of *The Monkees*, along with the alternative fashion that the characters wear. Both the form and content were meant to draw attention away from shows aired at the same time on other networks. The production did so by attempting to connect with subcultures and the “sexual revolution” of the time to draw in audiences with the new and current. While more explicitly focused on counterculture than earlier series Miller writes about, this pairing of form and content shows a line of continuity between

Miller's previous observations about how sitcom format produced camp content. While popularity and mainstream success are often associated with the comfortable and familiar, that was not the only strategy used to get attention. The new and the surprising are also important for drawing an audience.



Shots from the closing credits sequence of *Girl*. The characters stand in front of the camera as it rotates in place, cutting back and forth between Julie (Patricia Brake) and Timmy's camp posing.

In production, the team behind *Girl* did have to make concessions to conservative advertisers, focus groups, and executives. These groups wanted Tim to show more reluctance to playing Timmy, as well as an overall reduction in screen time for the Timmy alter ego; they wanted the writers to portray Tim as less emasculated, which was how focus groups often saw the character. Going into depth in consulting production notes and surveys, Miller paints a detailed picture of the push and pull of, and against, gender norms that produced the final version of *Girl*. The program celebrates gender non-conformity and the supposed ugliness of Timmy, while also playing to conservative views of gender. The chapter on *Girl* more than any other in the book connects Miller's interests in sitcom history, modes of production, audience response, and trans gender queer content to show how those all work together to produce camp. It also raises the question of why shows that push boundaries in their concepts the way *Girl* does have yet to reappear more often in subsequent decades. As does the previous chapter on norms of heterosexual marriage, this chapter challenges the perception of linear progress in representation, this time considering gender non-conformity. Miller mentions multiple times in the text that over time, 2SLGBTQ representation has largely focused in a cis-normative way on white gay men. While *Girl*, like many shows from the period, focuses on white characters, its queer portrayal goes beyond the common threads of stories surrounding gay men seen in later years.

Camp TV combines discussion of specific episodes of shows, as well as other relevant media, with reference to both the history of production of the shows in question as well as the greater context of television and the United States. If there is a weakness in the text, it is that the images included do not always seem the most pertinent to the main focus of a given chapter. Some sets of images, such as three pages with frame captures from an episode of the *Gale Storm Show*, were further explained in the endnotes, but if only looking at the main body of the text,

to what they are drawing attention is not completely clear, nor does it seem like the most important example to present. It is a little bit confusing to see images from a brief supporting argument, but not those from other, more in-depth discussions from the text. Perhaps there may have been reasons for this, such as the question of rights to reproduce the images, but that is not referenced in the text.

In addition to bringing attention to camp and queer gender and challenging perceptions of TV in the 50s and 60s, Miller also challenges gendered language and the perception of gender. Miller avoids using gendered pronouns in reference to any persons mentioned in the text, since the gender identity of others cannot be assumed from their presentation or the assumption of their birth sex. This is a surprising and challenging way to write, though it is easy not to notice the absence of the gendered pronouns for long passages.

However, this practice does have certain limits. The gender non-conformity of various performers discussed by Miller usually relies on the fact that we know what their assigned or perceived gender is. This perceived gender is usually indicated by individuals' names, and therefore Miller mentioning it further might be superfluous. Nonetheless, the perceived gender of the performer cannot be completely erased from the discussion, since it is always there. Discussing it is unavoidable, and Miller does use the terms "man" and "woman" when referencing characters from time to time, in addition to descriptors of "femininity" and "masculinity." While I want Miller's way of describing people to be the norm, it is not the norm, and assigned gender is still at play in discussions of queer gender. The moments of queer gender performance that Miller describes throughout the text suggest that there was more potential for growth and diversity in gender presentation in television, but slowly it became even narrower than it already was, even as audiences perceived other kinds of broadening. *Camp TV* draws attention to how these representations on television have changed for the better and have also gone backwards, or at least remained the same. There are other ways to discuss, frame, and understand gender, but we are still usually stuck in a binary one.



JUMP CUT

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America Ferrera winning an Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series in 2007. She plays the leading role as Betty Suárez in the ABS TV series *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010).



Betty Suárez created the so-called "Betty Style," prompting young women to "be your own Betty."

Queer Eye for Reel Latinx: camp, chic, and queer familia in *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time*

by [Astrid M. Fellner](#)

For decades, Latinx LGBTQ+ people have hardly been represented in North American popular culture, and when they were depicted on screen, they were grossly misrepresented. [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) In general, the entire Latinx population remains underrepresented in leading roles on TV. As Chelsea Candelario complained in 2018,

"Latinx are the U.S.' second largest racial group with 18 percent of the population. Yet, we only make up around 8 percent (just a five percent increase from 2016) of media representation. As people, citizens, movie goers, and TV watchers, we deserve a larger share in the pop culture that we help shape" (Candelario n.p.).

The only time that a Latina woman won an Emmy for a leading role was America Ferrera for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series of *Ugly Betty* (ABC 2006-2010) in 2007. In the wake of *Ugly Betty*, however, Latinx LGBTQ+ characters have increasingly gained more visibility on TV.

In the show *Ugly Betty*, triggering the success of a so-called "Betty Style," the character Betty Suárez is a style-challenged young woman from a Mexican immigrant family living in Queens who stumbles into a job at a Vogue-parody in Manhattan called *Mode*, and in doing so created a new form of queer Latina chic. This flamboyant queer Latina chic then also appears in other TV shows and comprises an important source of humor in the sitcom *One Day at a Time* (2017-present). But what exactly constitutes the power of style in *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time* and in what ways does the politics of style engage queer ethnic identity?

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In 2006, U.S. audiences loved America Ferrera, the actress who played the underdog awkward girl in *Ugly Betty*. As the *TV Guide* stated on December 21, 2006, "This was the year that America fell in love with America" (Malcom n.p.).



Fashion and style, the "*Ugly Betty* way," included a Guadalajara Poncho, clunky glasses and braces.



Betty's dorky persona set new fashion standards on TV, and fans both in North America as well as in Europe picked up her style. As David Graham states: "From her tartan kilts to her boisterous tie-front blouses and knit sweater vests, Betty's wardrobe can be found in many of Toronto's trendy stores. In London, hip stores like Topshop and H&M can't keep the elements of her look in stock" (Graham, n.p.).



Lydia Margarita Riera (portrayed by Rita Moreno) is one the main characters on the Netflix TV series *One Day at a Time*. She has a strong affinity for fashion, enjoying the performance of Latin chic every time she enters the stage in this sitcom.

I wish to look into cultural performances of queer *latinidad* ('Latinness') via the politics of style in these two recent TV series, *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time*. Particularly since the 1980s and 1990s, we have witnessed an increased commodification of and growing trend in exploiting an exotification of cultural representations of Latinx people. A major effect has been an "homogenous conceptualization of *Latinidad*" that erases "the specific histories and cultures of specific national groups within this pan-ethnicity" (110). Drawing on Arlene Dávila's study on the emergence of a "Hispanic market" (2001), Báez has shown how this "*commodified latinidad*" co-opts ethnic identification and has "appropriated feminism [...] to cash in on the 'buying power' of the female



Recent TV series like *Ugly Betty* offer a queer politics by challenging dominant norms of beauty and style by engaging in *camp latinidad*.



Actress, singer, and dancer Jennifer Lopez became a fashion icon when she started her fashion line *The J Lo by Jennifer Lopez* in 2001. In 2017, she started a shoe collection together with Giuseppe Zanotti.

audience” (110, italics in the original). *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time*, I argue, nevertheless manage to offer a queer politics in that they challenge norms of beauty, ethnicity, family, and heterosexuality through a performance of what I term *camp latinidad*.

Fashion and style not only serve as sites for exploring the body and issues of sexuality but also constitute powerful queer expressions on TV. These newer cultural productions lend social visibility to U.S. Latinx and they participate in both the construction and deconstruction of ideas of “the normal.” While mainstream images of Latina women on TV are part of an extensive disciplinary apparatus which promotes unrealistic beauty norms, producing widespread anxiety and alienation among women, *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time* have provided representational spaces for Latina women as well as Latinx people. In the following essay, I will analyze how Latinx politics and identity are portrayed in recent TV series, and examine the possibilities for resistant Latinx sartorial performances. *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time*, as I argue, serve not only as instruments for global consumer capitalism but also as forums for the empowerment of Latinx LGBTQ+ people. While *Ugly Betty* addresses today’s fascination with style and fashion with a protagonist who defies current hegemonic standards of beauty, *One Day at a Time* revels in *latinidad* by presenting an over-the-top grandmother who performs stereotypical representations of Cubanness. Both shows exhibit a politics of style that engages ethnic identity and creates new versions of Latin chic. Furthermore, both shows feature queer and non-binary characters. The queerness of these two shows, however, does not lie so much in the representational character of queer people or in the overtly LGBTQ+ content the shows feature. Queerness, I want to suggest, is rather produced through a disruption of norms, the disturbance of hegemonic kinship structures, and the depiction of what Richard T. Rodríguez has called “queer familia” (325).

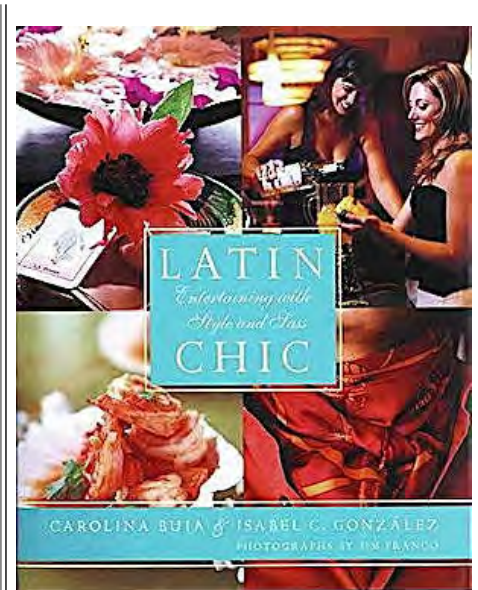
The politics of style and Latin Chic

As retailers are discovering that Latinas—primarily celebrities—can boost their sales and appeal to a broader audience, Latina chic has developed as a fashion style. For example, Mexican actress-singer Thalía Sodi has a clothing line at Kmart; model Daisy Fuentes works with Kohl’s; and Lucy Pereda, host of Galavision’s popular home decorating show *En Casa de Lucy*, has collaborated with Sears. Most famously, Jennifer Lopez boosted the modern Latina celebrity clothing line craze in 2001 by launching her JLo apparel line, one of the first celebrity fashion lines. She also created Sweetface Fashion Company, which Lopez owns jointly with Tommy Hilfiger’s brother. Latin style, however, has not only become popular in fashion, but it has also become a lifestyle which is promoted in books such as the 2005 *Latin Chic: Entertaining with Style and Sass* and advertised in the following way:

“Latin Chic: Entertaining with Style and Sass captures the best pan-Latin flavors and the unique spirit of Latin entertaining. Picture high heels, sexy women, handsome hombres, salsa music, exotic cocktails and irresistible food.” [2]

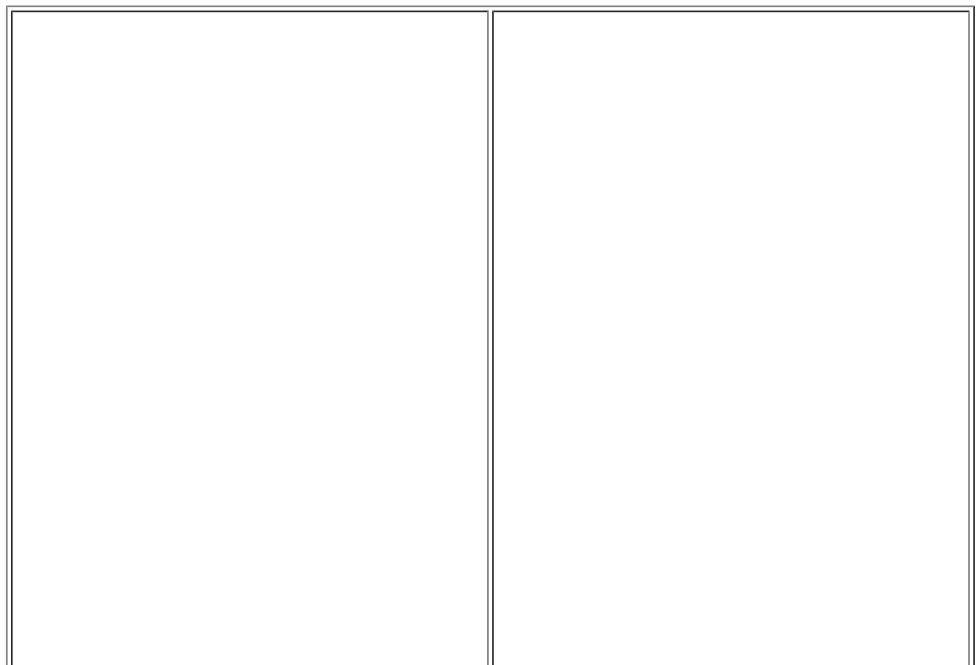


A celebrity of Hispanic TV, Lucy Pereda flaunts Latina chic in Galavision's popular home decorating show *En Casa de Lucy*.



Latin Chic: Entertaining with Style and Sass is a guidebook on how to throw parties. Featuring the fashions of top Latinx designers, it follows journalists Carolina Buia and Isabel González as they host parties in various locations in Latin America.

As Latin chic is packaged for mass consumption by some leading apparel makers, style and fashion advertising, drawing on the current fascination with Latina exoticism, has found its way into TV series. From Gabrielle Solís in *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) to Carmen De La Pica Morales in *The L Word* (2004-2009), Latina women are represented not only as “hot” but as extremely “stylish” and fashion-conscious. *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time* pick up on TV's fascination with Latin style and fashion but these shows feature characters who go against current standards of beauty. The power of style in these shows, I claim, lies both in their strategic re-inscription of Latin chic and in their queer politics that challenge dominant norms of beauty, whiteness, and heterosexuality through a camping of ethnicity.





Desperate Housewives' Gabrielle Solís (played by Eva Longoria) is a Latina super model from Guadalajara, who by marrying rich has made it into the exclusive community of Wisteria Lane. In this TV show, the character of Gabrielle is used as an icon of Latin chic.



Carmen De La Pica Morales is a Mexican American character on the Showtime television network series *The L Word*, appearing in season 2 and 3.



The TV show *Desperate Housewives* works through the presentation of a postmodern image culture in which identity is constructed through appearance and style—that is money—rather than race/ethnicity or gender.

In *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*, Stuart Ewen has argued that style “is a way that the human values, structures, and assumptions in a given society are aesthetically expressed and received” (3). Style is defined by its currency and its consumption, and it is often about “beautiful mouth-watering surfaces” (14), dealing with external impressions. Within the sensibilities of modernity, style gains power from being “inextricably woven into the fabric of social, political, and economic life” (23). In our postmodern times in which cultural modes of representation like TV “simulate” reality, people live in the “hyperreality” of simulations. In these simulations, images, spectacles, and the play of signs depict a situation in which these signs are the organizing forms of a new social order where simulation rules. As Baudrillard has argued, in a society of simulation, identities are constructed by the appropriation of images:

“It is reality itself today that is hyperrealist [...] it is quotidian reality in its entirety—political, social, historical and economic—that from now on incorporates the simulating dimension of hyperrealism. We live everywhere in an ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality” (148).

While I agree that we live in a hyperreal world, I believe that fashion is not only a simulacrum, but also a powerful political tool that has a direct grip on the body. The representation of appearance and its projection through media culturally engage various discourses regarding the construction and performance of gendered, ethnic, and sexual identities. “The signs of fashion” are not only “free-floating”; they are also “grounded in the referential” (Kellner 97). It is precisely this referential power that I want to analyze here.

Fashion is material culture that clothes bodies which come in different sizes, shapes, and colors. While recent TV series that revel in hyperreal simulations and celebrate fashion as the supersign of the times have become global phenomena,

DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES



Wisteria Lane, one might argue, is an illusionary place that embodies the viewers' romantic notions of suburbia by presenting beautiful, sexy bodies. As Chambers has argued, *Desperate Housewives* "makes a concerted effort to maintain the surface appearance of both heterosexual normality and traditional gender roles" (*Queer Politics* 121).



Betty Suárez works for *Mode*, a fashion

the production of sumptuary style—while often appropriated globally—is also a local phenomenon rooted in local histories. The recent mainstreaming or crossing over of Latina style provokes complex questions that engage in the debates over “style tribalism.” As Andrew Ross puts it,

“Popular style, at its most socially articulate, appears at the point where commonality ends and communities begin, fractioned off into the geography of difference, even conflict” (Ross 289).

And as Sunaina Maira explains:

“At certain moments, as when new style tribes emerge or the visual markers associated with one style subculture are taken on by another, these underlying ‘social values’ come under scrutiny, or are simply absorbed into already existing ‘geographies of difference’” (331).

Ugly Betty deals explicitly with fashion and style: Betty Suárez works for *Mode*, a fashion magazine. She is an ordinary young New Yorker who tries to fit into the world of high fashion. In this show, style functions as an ethnic marker, pointing to the local tribal styles and their various forms of appropriation in U.S. media productions. In a different way, *One Day at a Time* also engages in the politics of style as it plays with tropicalized versions of *latinidad*, offering an exaggerated version of the image of the exotic, sexy Latina. According to Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chavez-Silverman, to tropicalize “means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values” (8). However, with humor and satire in *One Day at a Time*’s carefully crafted dialogue, underlined by the canned laughter of the sitcom format, the show not only self-consciously references the current trend in media to commodify Latinas but also subversively exposes *latinidad* as a construction.

When talking about the representation of ethnicity of U.S. Latinx—*latinidad*—we have to think of the various forms of mainstream appropriation as well as the ethnic engagements with fashion; for instance, we can see various parodic versions of haute couture in recent TV shows. Much has already been written about stereotypical representations of Latinas on TV and various transcultural forms of tropicalization. For example, in *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media*, Clara Rodríguez has addressed Latinx (in)visibility in popular culture in detail. She concludes that in fighting misrepresentation, alternative filmmakers have sought to deconstruct media images of Latinos and construct new images and spaces that are by, for, and about the Latinx community. Other critics of Latina images have maintained that Latinas are often portrayed as exotic seductresses (cf. Holtzman), as tacky and overly emotional (cf. Valdivia), and as hypersexualized spitfire (cf. Molina Guzmán and Valdivia). In such representations, *latinidad* is tied to exoticism, and it is precisely that focus on the sexualized “brown” body that has been turned into a “postmodern ethnic commodity” (McCracken 11). What I am interested here, however, is less the representation of Latinx on TV and its related identity politics than the analysis of how high fashion—a sign of the white upper class—is scripted in these TV shows to have the Latinx characters create an anti-fashion. My question is about how fashion as a commodity that promotes a normative ideal of femininity get linked to *latinidad* in these shows and how is it queered in this process. How are cultural and political issues clothed in these shows to express *camp latinidad*?

magazine. Style in this TV show functions as an ethnic marker, pointing to the local tribal styles and their various forms of appropriation in U.S. media productions.



Jennifer Lopez is often tropicalized as a hypersexualized Latina who serves voyeuristic pleasure.



Highlighting non-normative sexual politics, *Ugly Betty* manages to queer television by debunking stereotypes and disrupting gender normativity.



To answer these questions, I want to shift the discussion of identity politics away from a debate that centers on questions of representation and turn to questions related to what Samuel A. Chambers calls the “politics of norm” (“Heteronormativity” 81). Thus, rather than investigate the transcultural representations of *latinidad* with reference to questions like, “How and in what ways are Latinx represented?” in these shows, I want to show how Latin chic is used to fashion or refashion ethnic and gendered norms, thereby engaging in a queer politics of TV.

Refashioning norms: Latin Geek Chic and (un)coolness in *Ugly Betty*

TV, as Chambers argues, is a “constitutive element of culture” (“Heteronormativity” 84) that “like any other cultural artefact, participates in the constitution of our reality” (“Heteronormativity” 85). TV is political because of the multiple ways in which it can participate in the reproduction or deconstruction of norms. To clarify, norms are not the same as rules or a law, as Judith Butler has made clear. As she explains: “A norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of *normalization*” (41, italics in the original). A norm calls for the normal, as Michael Warner has added: “The rhetoric of normalization also tells us that the taken-for-granted norms of common sense are the only criteria of value” (60).

While both Butler and Warner mainly talk about “the normal” in the context of sexuality, the concept of “the normal” can, of course, be extended to race and ethnicity as well. Evoking the statistical bell curve, with a median point at the top of the bell which contains normal identity, the process of normalization also affects ethnic groups by marking their existence as other (cf. Chambers, “Heteronormativity” 84). White heterosexuality clearly is the norm and within the current Latin boom, one could say that sexualized, slim, and erotic Latinas have become the norm. As these norms have no transcendent standing but only persist “to the extent that [they are] acted out in social practice” (Butler 48), TV has a tremendous influence in the daily reproduction and implementation of “the normal.” *Ugly Betty* not only criticizes notions of normality but also offers a model that opposes this ethnocentric and heteronormative model. Defying hegemonic discourses of the normal on all levels, the show has a cast of characters who not only expose the workings of normality as an illusion but offer powerful counter examples which break this illusion and demonstrate alternatives to it.

Ugly Betty is based on the popular Colombian telenovela *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea* (I’m Betty, the Ugly One), which was produced by Radio Cadena Nacional de Colombia and was broadcast between 1999 and 2001. This telenovela was a blockbuster in Latin America and the United States, and it has been spun off into successful soap series in Europe and Asia (cf. Avila-Saavedra 135). The U.S. remake echoes the genre of the telenovela but substantially modified in format to fit the perceived taste of mainstream U.S. viewers. It was adapted for a New York City setting by creator/developer Silvio Horta and co-producers Salma Hayek and Ben Silverman. Hayek appears on the show as Sofia Reyes, in addition to playing a cameo role as an actress on a fictional telenovela watched by the main character’s family in early episodes. The series won numerous awards including two 2007 Golden Globes and a 2007 Writers Guild Award for best New Series. It promoted itself by using the tagline “Ugly Is the New Beautiful” and advertising features a 22-year-old woman (played by America Ferrera) who is “the outcast with her nose pressed to the window wanting to be with the cool kids who reject her” (cf. Jensen n.p.). Week after week, while trying to fit in or be whom she thinks others want her to be, Betty gets involved in some scheme only to learn by the episode’s end that the best way to live is to stay true to herself.

The successful Colombian telenovela *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea* triggered a series of different versions all around the world.



America Ferrara at the 2007 Golden Globe, winning in the categories 'Best Performance by an Actress in a Television Series' and 'Best Television Series.'



Betty, the slightly overweight woman with blue braces and 'bad style' set a new trend and turned geek chic into the new cool.

Ugly Betty advocates a new style that was soon considered cool. This style is expressed in the tagline "Ugly Is the New Beautiful" and refers to a particular notion of geek chic. In *The Birth (and Death) of the Cool*, Ted Gioia has proclaimed the death of cool, arguing that hipness and trendiness have fallen out of favor since the 1990s. He sees this as part of a process of "uncooling," which entails a cultural paradigm shift towards nerdy tech-savvy characters in popular culture (cf. 154-163). Annette Geiger has also claimed that cool is out both as an aesthetic and affective category, and that young people have recognized that it has degenerated into fashion attitudes (cf. Geiger 90). The alleged death of cool in popular culture can be seen in the emergence of television formats "celebrating nerdiness" (Gioia 8), which portray the stories of the utterly uncool. Contrary to Gioia and Geiger, who cite diverse recent television formats and advertisement campaigns as evidence for an extensive uncooling of U.S. society, Judith Kohlenberger (2012) finds the celebration of nerdiness a new form of cool. Dr. Leonard Hofstadter, the experimental physicist and protagonist of the U.S. sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–present) epitomizes this notion of uncoolness when he says: "Our society has undergone a paradigm shift: In the information age, you and I are the alpha males" ("The Middle Earth Paradigm," 1.6). Crucially, *The Big Bang Theory* relies on the tagline: "Smart Is the New Sexy." Similarly, one could argue that *Ugly Betty* favors this new kind of nerdiness, giving it a cool connotation. The tagline "Ugly Is the New Beautiful" testifies to this change in cool sensibility, here criticizing society's obsession with appearances.



Dr. Leonard Hofstadter, the experimental physicist and protagonist of *The Big Bang Theory*, has achieved cult status as a nerd.

Although many viewers might not consider Betty Suárez to be deserving of the adjective "ugly," the stylization of this character diverges from conventional representations of the sexy Latina body. Betty's ethnic heritage and lower-middle-class upbringing in Queens clearly add to her outsider status at *Mode* magazine. From the outset, however, viewers could tell that Betty has a beauty hiding beneath bangs, behind braces, and under frumpy clothes. As the show progresses, Betty gradually starts to allow some of her inner beauty to manifest itself in her outer appearance, making gradual changes throughout the fourth season, living

up to the show's tagline.

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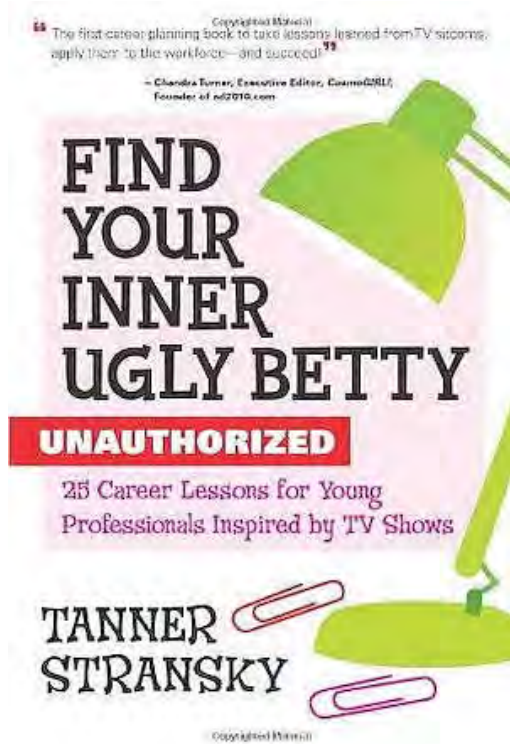
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Tanner Stransky's *Find Your Inner Ugly Betty: 25 Career Lessons for the Young Professional* was inspired by the TV show *Ugly Betty*.

Judging from the responses and blogs on the Internet, the show has received primarily positive feedback. One reaction by a fan reads like this: "Every week the show says very plainly, and with just the right amount of bitchiness 'How dare you tell me what is NORMAL!'" [3.] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The series has not only triggered the popularity of the so-called Betty Style, but it has also led to the creation of a book called *Find Your Inner Ugly Betty: 25 Career Lessons for the Young Professional* by Tanner Stransky. The show's network, ABC, also sponsored the campaign "Be Ugly '07," an outreach campaign for girl empowerment which teamed up with the advocacy group Girls Inc (www.girlsinc.org) in order to promote self-esteem among women by presenting a positive image (cf. Gauntlett 70-71). There are many reasons as to why the show has elicited so much positive reaction. As Ashli L. Dykes has argued,

"ABC's *Ugly Betty* became a favorite among viewers and television critics for its humorous yet sensitive portrayals of characters typically relegated to token status on American television—immigrant families, gay men, transgendered individuals, and women who do not fit into traditional definitions of beauty" (131).

For one, it has caught the attention of gays and lesbians because of its queerness. Michael Jensen, for instance, has called the show "freaking fabulous (and gay)" (Jensen n.p.). The show has been called queerer than *The L Word* because it displays a queer sensibility: it is set in the fashion world and it features a transgender character, a gay character, and a pre-adolescent boy who wants to be a girl and comes out in the last season. Betty, too—although marked heterosexual—can be read as a queer character because she exposes the concept of normality as a hollow construction. Apart from the gay community, the show has also caught the attention of Latinx as the show provides a positive role model of a supportive Chicanx family whose values, honesty and warmth make everyone else jealous. As Betty delivers a message about self-acceptance and being true to oneself, the character's ethnic background is at the center of attention. When America Ferrera won her Golden Globe for Best Actress, her speech addressed her function as a role model for the Latinx community. As one blogger states:

"Her teary speech about being a role model for young women was inspiring, especially since it is so rare to see a working-class, Mexican-American character in such a prominent role on TV, particularly a normal-looking, smart young woman whose father is an illegal immigrant!" (Cohen n.p.)

Feminist activist Olivia Ortiz was also moved by America Ferrera's speech and posted the following open letter at the website of Women in Media and News:

"Dear Ms. Ferrera,
I found myself openly weeping with you as you [took the stage](#) to accept your Golden Globe award for 'Best Actress' on Monday night. [From your acceptance speech](#), I quote: 'I hear from young girls on a daily basis how Betty makes them feel worthy and loveable and how they have more to offer the world than they thought.' As a young Latina feminist, I wanted to shout from the rooftop of my building my congratulations to you and to say thank you—thank you



Ugly Betty features a series of gay characters. Marc (played by Michael Urie) serves as Betty's secondary antagonist. In the last season, he is promoted to new creative director of *Mode*.

for exemplifying the class, ethnic and body ideals of this woman and of real women the world over." (WIMN's Voices n.p.)

What is particularly interesting about the U.S. version of *Betty, La Fea* is that unlike its other national renditions (like the German *Verliebt in Berlin*, for instance), *Ugly Betty* focuses on an ethnic subject and makes ethnicity an important part of the story. It combines the politics of the body with the question of citizenship, addressing the currently most sensitive domestic issue of illegal immigrants when it focuses on the story of the main character's father. Although Betty's father has lived in the United States for 30 years, he is an illegal alien. One of the subplots deals with his struggle with the INS to obtain a green card. Much of the action that drives Betty's need to be successful and make money is that she struggles to get her father decent health care. She needs money to pay for her father's lawyers and for a flight to Mexico so that her father can enter the country legally. While Betty is the outcast in the fashion world of the magazine *Mode*, and her family is often mocked by employees at the company, all her co-workers at some point or other end up in Betty Suarez's house in Queens; there they realize that they only find acceptance in Betty's family who ignore the glitzy surfaces of their looks but like them for exactly who they are.



The show openly tackles issues of illegal immigration. Betty's father, Ignacio Suarez (Tony Plana) hides the truth about his status, using a fake social security number. He gets deported but is later reunited with his family in Queens.



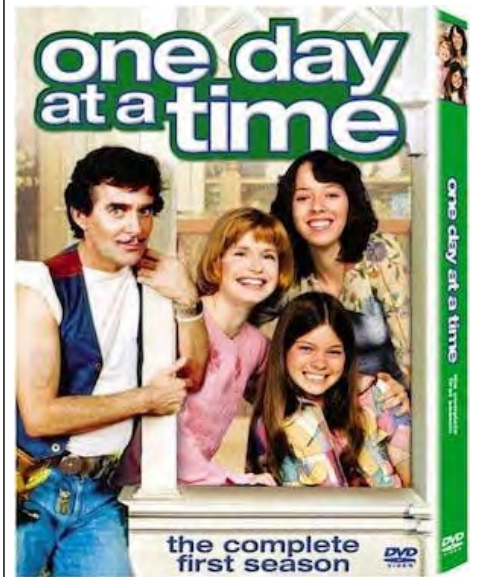
Betty's *familia* not only gives her support but serves as an extended family to Betty's co-workers. The house in Queens constitutes a site for new kinship relations.

Kinship and *la familia* in *One Day at a Time*

One Day at a Time was created by Mike Royce and *Jane the Virgin*'s Gloria Calderon Kellett. It received several awards and nominations, including three Primetime Emmy Award nominations. The series was also nominated for a GLAAS Media Award for Outstanding Comedy Series. This multi-camera sitcom was filmed in front of a live audience. It tells the story of nurse practitioner Penelope (Justina Machado), a single mother of two kids—the headstrong feminist Elena (Isabella Gomez) and the stubborn tween Alex (Marcel Ruiz). In raising her kids, Penelope receives help from her mother Lydia (Rita Moreno) who lives with her and from her hipster landlord Schneider (Todd Grinnell). The show is a remake of Norman Lear's 1975-1984 sitcom of the same name, which starred Bonnie Franklin as a divorced mother raising two teenaged daughters in Indianapolis.



One Day at a Time focuses on the daily life of the Álvarezes, a Cuban American family.



One Day at a Time is Norman Lear's remake of the iconic 1975 sitcom.

The 2017 rendition of *One Day at a Time*, however, is different in crucial ways. Centering on a Cuban American family living in Echo Park in East L.A., it features the single mother Penelope and her dominating mother Lydia, played by the legendary Rita Moreno. This show mobilizes not only a crucial subversion of dominant sexual politics but also hetero- and cissexual norms and traditional forms of kinship. Surely the issues that the Álvarez family is facing in 2017/2018 are different from the problems the Coopers faced in 1975. Not only is Penelope a single mother but she is also a military veteran who suffers from PTSD and she must constantly fight to make ends meet. Her mother Lydia, in turn, cannot let go of her Cuban roots and is scared that her family will forget their heritage, which is why she outperforms Cubanness by flaunting exaggerated dance moves and displaying a rich and thick Cuban accent. *One Day at a Time*, just like *Ugly Betty*, works through the presentation of a postmodern image culture à la *Queer Eye*, in which identity is constructed through appearance and style.

The first season of *One Day at a Time* aired on January 6, 2017, two weeks before Donald Trump's inauguration and three weeks before Trump signed a travel ban



Lydia is the heart of the family. She is a source of strength for her daughter Penelope.

that barred immigrants from certain countries from entering the U.S. This sitcom is overtly political, negotiating some of the currently hottest issues. For example, in Season 1, Elena's friend's parents are deported back to Mexico. Season 3 spends an entire arc on Schneider, who is Canadian, and the Cuban-born Lydia each getting their citizenship, a storyline particularly meaningful in light of the heightened debate about illegal aliens and immigration.



Lydia enjoys showing off her dance moves, using her private space, separated by a curtain, as a stage to perform Cubanness.



Just like *Ugly Betty*, *One Day at a Time* offers criticism on issue of immigration. In season 2, Lydia is revealed to reside illegally in the US and the show follows her journey to citizenship.

The show has received overwhelmingly positive reviews, and it is generally agreed that this show fulfills an important representational function.[4] As one review puts it:

“*One Day at a Time* was a show that mattered because it painted a nuanced, rich portrait of a hard-working family of immigrants and second-generation immigrants at precisely the moment that portrait needed to be seen” (Chaney n.p.).

It also paints a nuanced picture of a queer family, offering a fresh media representation of queer Latinx people. In society and in people's personal sense of identity, a widespread assumption that heterosexuality is the norm also produces heteronormativity. And the idea that people are cisgender—that is, that every person's self-identity conforms with the gender that corresponds to their biological sex—produces cisnormativity. This is a lesson that Elena, Penelope's queer daughter who announces her being gay in the first season, teaches her family when in Season 2 she introduces her queer friends to her family, specifying which personal pronouns her friends want to be addressed.



Elena: Anyway, this is the advocacy group I was telling you about, The Feminist Gamers of Echo Park. We've been hanging out online and this is our first meeting IRL.

Dani: Welcome. What's everybody's name? I'm Dani. My pronouns are “she” and “her.”

When Elena introduces her queer friends to her family, she gives them a brief intro to queer theory.

Syd: Syd. My pronouns are “they” and “them.”
Margaux: I’m Margaux. Pronouns “ze” and “zir.”
Penelope: I’m Penelope. My thoughts are “Huh?” and “What?”
Seriously, what is happening?
Elena: Well, because some people are gender non-conforming, they have preferred pronouns.
Lydia: Ah! I am Lydia. Pronouns “Ly-dee-a.” (“To Zir, With Love” 2.3)

Elena, although still young, is well versed in gender/queer theory, and the lessons she teaches her family (and, of course, her viewers) have the effect of troubling “the normal.” Apart from this pronoun lesson, Elena also enlightens the audience on the “x” in the label Latinx: This term makes room for people who are trans, queer, agender, non-binary, gender non-conforming or gender fluid. And it is precisely these in-between categories which the show engages.

Elena’s outspoken feminist and gender non-conforming views together with the portrayal of Syd, her non-binary love-interest, are certainly the most conspicuous queer features of this TV series. Even more importantly, Elena manages to transform her family. Unyoking family and kinship from oppressive models of patriarchy, heteronormativity and capitalism, Elena crafts a model of kinship



Elena does not want to celebrate her *quinceañera*, and when she tries on her beautiful ball gown, she does not look content. This, in turn, saddens Lydia because she believes that a gown should make a girl cry in joy.

The entire first season is dominated by the preparations for and debates over Elena’s *Quinces*. This traditional celebration in honor of a girl’s 15th birthday traditionally marks a girl’s coming-of-age. Afterwards she is considered a mature person who is ready to assume family and social responsibilities. This traditional rite-of-passage shows that for queer Latinx, family often becomes a source of anxiety, as they feel an obligation to be involved in family in a certain heteronormative way, and this is precisely Elena’s dilemma in season one. Initially, violently reacting against the celebration, Elena finds a way of subverting this tradition, making it work for her. It first seems as if she “just” gave in to her grandmother’s wish to throw this party when she reluctantly puts on the white dress. In the end, however, her grandmother gives in and surprises Elena by giving her a beautiful white suit (instead of the dress).



As Elena walks out onto the floor at her party with her quince date, she surprises everyone when she is wearing a white suit instead of a dress.



Wearing a pantsuit and being reunited with her friends, Elena is finally happy.

In the culminating scene at the end of Season One, Elena should dance with her estranged father. But she and her mother realize that the father has left so the mother takes over and dances with her daughter. The couple is then joined by the younger brother, the grandmother, their neighbor Schneider, and ultimately even Penelope’s boss. When the camera zooms in on this group, it is clear that this is Elena’s *familia*. The show clearly pushes for an ideal of a Cuban-American family in terms of a queer diasporic community, which is based, as David L. Eng has it, “not on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments” (4). This is a key message. Based on affiliation, Schneider, a Canadian who lives



Instead of the classic father-daughter dance, Elena dances with her Mother. They are then joined by the rest of her *familia*.

illegally in the United States, can in this way also become Cuban. In fact, as we see later in season 2, Schneider will learn Spanish, signaling his familial attachments and commitment. The sitcom therefore questions and presents various ways and means of making *familia*, trans-ethnically and trans-racially (in this family, Cuban Americans make *familia* with a white Canadian and a Jewish doctor) without prioritizing one form of family as the only one. In this sense, *One Day at a Time* interrupts those discourses that intimately link nationalism and heteropatriarchy as underpinnings of a compulsory normative Latino/a family romance. It does so by exposing a curious blend of queer sensibility, launching its critique at normative discourses through strategic re-inscriptions of *camp latinidad*.

Camping ethnicity

Camp, as many critics have argued, connotes a certain radicalism, an attempt to expose—through parodic theatricality—society’s highly constructed fictions of identity. In “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag famously expanded the term to include a broader meaning, authorizing the use of “camp” as an adjective for objects, artworks, and styles seen merely as ironic—to be appreciated for their retro-charm, their nostalgia, or their flamboyance—but not necessarily as political gestures. As a result, “Notes on Camp,” allowed camp culture to shade off into popular culture. In contrast, David Bergmann has argued that camp always “exists in tension with popular culture, commercial culture and consumerist culture” and “the person who can camp and can see things as campy is outside the cultural mainstream” (Bergman 5). As an aesthetic sensibility, it is not measured by standards of beauty, but by “the extent of its artifice and stylization” (Eco 408).

“To be camp, objects must possess some exaggeration or marginal aspect (one says ‘it’s too good or too important to be camp’), as well as a certain degree of vulgarity, even when there is a claim to refinement” (Eco 408).

And as Ramón García has argued, camp is also an important Chicano sensibility, as it constitutes “a form of survival for those Chicanos and Chicanas that live on the fringes and margins of both North American culture and Chicano culture” (211).

“It ironies, parodies and satirizes the very cultural forms that marginalize and exclude” (211).

One Day at a Time features a Cuban American family, but their peripheral position in East L.A. situates them outside of the cultural mainstream. Betty Suárez’s marginal position as a Chicana with a poor working-class background also gives her the necessary distance to launch her points of critique. While Betty’s parody is a performance which draws on exaggerated, flamboyant Latin style, combining it with elements of haute couture, it is also a deeply political project as it produces social visibility to Latinx, addresses social and political issues, and shows how the politics of style is inextricably woven into the fabric of social, political, and economic life. With the goal of uncovering and deconstructing culture’s constant process of naturalizing normative desire, camp puts on a grand show of de-naturalized desire and gender. In *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time*, the main characters put on a grand show to denaturalize normative whiteness.

Betty’s ethnic performance of camp also draws on the Chicanx sensibility of



The iconic poncho has become the signature sign of the show's queer sensibility.



Betty's kitschy outfits remind of the Chicana sensibility of *rasquache*.

rasquache, a “sort of Chicano *kitsch* that has been promoted as Chicano art” (García 214). In 1992 Thomas Ybarra-Fausto famously defined *rasquache* as a Chicana version of Euroamerican camp. But unlike *rasquache* aesthetics, which aims at making the Chicana viewer comfortable by affirming that which is supposed to be familiar, camp is more confrontational. Unlike *rasquache*, camp “presents the negativity of gender breakdowns and sexual deviance in order to affirm heterogeneity and the difficulty of consensus” (García 214-215). Clearly, *Ugly Betty* displays such deviance as it relies on a highly subversive queer sensibility, and the characters’ performative hyperbolic gestures are citations that have the power to resignify. As one fan puts it:

“It’s a good thing Betty Suarez’s poncho is roomy. Under that billowing bright-red garment, which Suarez famously wore in the first episode of ABC’s ‘Ugly Betty,’ Suarez sneaked in the tools of a television revolution. [. . .] Until Betty’s desperately un-chic ‘Guadalajara’ poncho swooped into the snooty offices of Meade Publishing, we rarely, if ever, saw clashes of class and culture like the one we’re seeing now between the highest echelons of Manhattan society and this lower-middle class resident of Queens.” (Ryan n.p.)

Instead of the stereotypical Cinderella story where the heroine gets a makeover and finds romantic bliss, *Ugly Betty* focuses on a character who is professional and whose efforts make her successful at work and appealing to the audience.[5] It reflects the profound artifice that signals camp. Displaying a sense of aesthetics and style that negotiates between artificial and natural, the show thus rocks the very idea of what is natural. According to a fan,

“Betty’s home and love life were are? sweet and natural, and still replete with a dramatic gay tween, a variety of extravagant characters and an aesthetic that provided a homely-beautiful, or *jolie-laide*, counterpoint to the haute couture” (Crosbie n.p.).

By presenting the character of Lydia, the Cuban grandmother, *One Day at a Time* also introduces camp to its show. Especially the flamboyant appearances of *la abuelita*, who is shown to live behind a curtain in the apartment, highlight the commodification of ethnicity only to subvert it when the audience’s laughter puts an exclamation point at the end of each funny sentence. Always making a dramatic appearance by throwing the curtain aside—the stagedness of her appearance being underlined by the loud applause of the audience—Lydia self-consciously performs a traditional Cuban woman. Conspicuously, her exaggerated Cuban accent, which is one of the show’s main sources of humor, underlines her camp *latinidad*. In a melodramatic way, Lydia sports “huge glasses and a matter-of-fact confidence” and “sweeps about the set like she’s on a Broadway stage” (Framke n.p.).[6]

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Lydia loves making a dramatic appearance by throwing the curtains aside and using her bedroom as a stage.



Lydia's appearances on stage are always followed by applause of the audience, which highlights the theatricality of the Cubaness that she enacts.

Conclusion

Popular culture, as many critics have pointed out, can be seen “as a structure of dominance that perpetuates and enhances a dominant ideology invested with the social construction of whiteness, and correspondingly with capitalist cultural commodification” (Figueroa 265). It is, however, also the site where dominant ideology can be subverted. As Chambers has argued,

“The queer politics of television has a significant role to play, specifically in the frame of contemporary cultural and political practices that stigmatise and marginalise gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals” (*Queer Politics* 23).

As I have shown, *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time* provide crucial subversions of mainstream sexual politics and heterosexual norms. The characters depicted in these shows not only help push the boundaries of acceptance in film and television, but the shows also contribute to the cultural politics of television, especially the way in which the content of these shows themselves engage with the politics of their time.

These two shows offer a queer politics that challenges norms of beauty, whiteness, family, heterosexuality, and heteronormativity through a performance of *camp latinidad*. Exposing a queer sensibility, *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time* launch their criticism at society through re-inscriptions of Latin chic and a parody of ethnicity that also offers new ways of reconfiguring kinship to encompass alternative forms of belonging. Style is politics in these shows, and the politics of style, which has become the official idiom of the market, is exposed as an intimate component of subjectivity, contributing to constructions of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. These TV shows disrupt gender normativity, drawing the attention to other forms of family. They do so by employing fashion and style as powerful queer expressions on TV.



Displaying a queer sensibility, this show offers new ways of reconfiguring kinship to encompass alternative forms of belonging.

Notes

1. The term Latinx is a gender inclusive term which is used instead of the gendered forms of Latino/a. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. For more information, see < <http://hispanicad.com/blog/news-article/had/art-literature/latin-chic-entertaining-style-and-sass> > October 11, 2005. Web. 14 February 2021. See also the website *Latin Chic Style* at <<http://www.latinchicstyle.com/>> Web. 14 February 2021.
3. Thom at the AfterElton blog, 25 March 2007, <<http://www.afterelton-q5.mtv.com/TV/2007/3/uglybetty>>. The AfterElton blog was a culture website which was dissolved in 2015. [[return to page 2](#)]
4. Netflix canceled *One Day at a Time* in March 2019 supposedly because of the show's lack of viewers. This news was met with great disappointment, especially by its Latinx fans, and, as evinced from social media, there were several efforts to save the series. In June 2019 Pop announced that it would pick up the series and produce Season 4 in 2020. Despite the cancellation Netflix, however, has tweeted about the cultural importance of this show, acknowledging the show's political impact.
5. In the fourth and final season, Betty does appear slightly more 'fashionable'—her hair is smooth and straight, her braces get removed, and she begins to wear designer pieces—but her makeover does not become a major plot point. Also, Betty's change is shown more as a gradual evolution as her character becomes a successful woman whose career shifts from assistant to editor.
6. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/1/8/14168690/one-day-at-a-time-netflix-review-rita-moreno>

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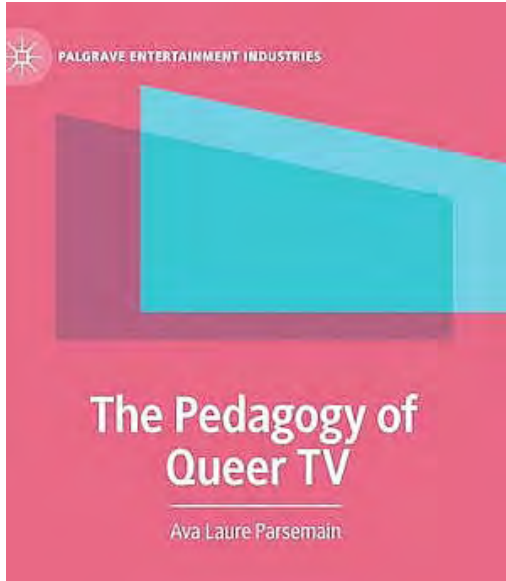
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"In interrogating contemporary depictions of queers on American television, this book aims to go beyond questions of visibility to critically investigate such representations." (p. 3)



Glee queers gender and sexuality through its teenage characters and how it brings to light issues of oppression and bullying, thus linking private and personal matters to broader societal problems." (p. 40)

Can queer TV teach on its own?

review by [Alexis Poirier-Saumure](#)

Ava Laure Parsemain, *The Pedagogy of Queer TV*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 261 pp.

With *The Pedagogy of Queer TV*, Ava Laure Parsemain offers a most contemporary and up-to-date exploration of queer televisual representation's explosion in the last decade in the United States. Indeed, the 2010's have witnessed the unstoppable ascension of private networks and streaming giants, and with it the advent of new worlds of queer representation. As it has already been pointed out by queer media studies scholarship, the very idea of queer TV seems antithetical. Isn't the core idea of queerness, that is, a subversion of the norm, irreconcilable with television, normative space *par excellence*, a place defined by the mainstream, by the ordinariness and normativity of domesticity (p. 2)? Beyond this fundamental theoretical (im)possibility, Parsemain argues that television can indeed be queer, but that such possibility resides in how we observe it. The potential queerness of television, in the recent years, has been apprehended in terms of visibility—a rather limited understanding of representation issues. With her book, the author aims to "go beyond questions of visibility to critically investigate such representations" (p. 3) through the prism of pedagogy. Hoping to "demonstrate that entertainment techniques can function as pedagogical tools" (p. 7), she embarks on a journey to observe how pedagogical queer TV can be, or maybe (although not obviously), how TV can be pedagogically queer.

Groundings: the scope and methodology of *The Pedagogy of Queer TV*

Parsemain's book ponders queer TV's educational potential through an analysis of eight fictional and reality TV shows in the United States: *Glee* (Fox, 2009), *Empire* (Imagine Television & Fox, 2015), *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Logo TV & VH1, 2009), *The Prancing Elites Project* (Oxygen, 2015), *I Am Cait* (E!, 2015), *Looking* (HBO, 2014), *Transparent* (Prime Video, 2014) and *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015). Her work is critically anchored in the field of audience studies. Indeed, Parsemain's initial move is to depart from the now obsolete framework of *media effects* (p. VI), a rather passive, linear frame of thought about audiences' reception of (entertainment) media, toward an understanding of what *learning* occurs through media consumption in a more active model. Wanting to go beyond *what* queer TV can teach, which would limit her argument to a somewhat tired statement about visibility, the book

"explores pedagogy as a method and emphasizes the 'how' questions [...] it examines the pedagogical models, techniques and tools that television uses to teach about queer identities and related social issues" (p. 4).



Empire: “Instead of conveying a clear-cut moral message, [*Empire*] presents a range of views, thus allowing space for deliberation and reflection. This constructivist pedagogy is typical of entertainment media and soap operas.” (p. 66)



RuPaul's Drag Race ... “does not entirely fulfil its pedagogical potential. While it queers gender through language and technologies of drag, it also preserves dominant conceptions of gender and race, reproduces hegemonic stereotypes and superficially engages with social issues. However, in recent years the series has evolved away from its misogynistic and transphobic ideology.” (p. 96)



The Prancing Elites Project: “Through their flexible identities and ambiguous gender performance, the cast of *The Prancing Elites Project* embody queerness. Transcending labels such as “man,” “woman,” “gay” and “trans,” they blend femininity and masculinity. Rejecting identity labels and conventional binary categories, they celebrate the shifting, the in-between and the undefined.” (p. 137)

Entertainment, education and pedagogies

Parsemain gathers a few central concepts in preparation for her endeavor. First of all, she mobilizes the notion of “eudaimonic entertainment—the merging of enjoyment and learning” as a “key to understanding the pedagogy of television” (p. 5) and a way to add her voice to the decades-long debate within educational and media studies about the possibility of educative entertainment. The whole book is also premised upon a distinction between two pedagogical models. First, she eschews a transmissive pedagogical model in which learning happens unidirectionally, from an all-knowing single speaker to passive recipients—related to the much criticized discourses on media effects. She then espouses a constructivist pedagogical model, in which learning happens throughout a process where the learners actively come to change their understanding. (p. 7).

Although that distinction is surely useful in order to position her argument within a media studies genealogy and along the lines of Stuart Hall's theory of reception, it is noteworthy and rather surprising that no scholarship on critical and queer approaches to pedagogy is referenced on the page. For example, how can we discuss the notion of a constructivist pedagogical model without considering Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a work that became a pillar for elaborating the vast field of critical pedagogies—where education about one's condition of political and ideological subordination becomes a first step toward liberation? And how does a book about queer TV and pedagogy not engage with the vast theoretical field of *queer* pedagogy, for example the work of Susanne Luhmann (1998) or Deborah Britzman (1995)? Indeed, one of the tenets of queer pedagogy is that it must go beyond a pedagogy about queerness and actually queer pedagogy itself (*ibid*). In a way, this is what eudaimonic entertainment strives to accomplish, so why then not engage with such queer studies scholarship?

What surprises even more is Parsemain's inaugural definition of her use of the term queer, a mandatory epistemological location for anyone who ventures on such theoretical terrains. Although she assembles various authors who make for a rich resource for thinking queerly, she also positions herself quite rigidly with regards to an enduring debate within queer theory: the so-called opposition between queer as ontology and queer as praxis. Citing Richard Dyer (2002), she agrees that,

“Queer is something you are, constitutively, rather than something you might do (or have done) feel (have felt), mainly, sometimes, once, maybe.”

I do appreciate this thinly veiled critique toward “bi-curious” straight identities and other homo/heteronormative fantasies of sexual/political radicality. However, the decision to prioritize queer solely as an identity and to foreclose the possibility of queer as a set of material interventions on a normalized social plane runs the risk of reaffirming a useless binary opposition, of falling into essentialism. It may also allow for the proliferation of apolitical, performative accounts of queerness. Clarifying this position further, Parsemain reminds us,

“This book does not focus on textual queerness (queerness of the medium). It is concerned with depictions of queers (as a noun) in

series that portray LGBT+ identities” (p. 14).



I Am Cait ...”uses the generic features of reality TV as pedagogical tools to educate about transgender issues. [...] Moreover, the programme adopts a constructivist pedagogy by juxtaposing conflicting understandings of gender and transgenderism and by raising questions without answering them. By using these constructivist techniques, it invites discussion and promotes ethics as respectful engagement with difference.” (p. 142)



“Looking does not merely promote assimilation, but questions processes of normalisation. Through self-reflexivity, love triangles and conflicts, it captures the tensions between homonormativity and queer resistance. Adopting a constructivist pedagogy, it does not simply deliver an ideological message but teaches by juxtaposing perspectives, raising questions, inviting reflection and opening up debates.” (p. 187)

Although this distinction is unavoidable for a book aligned with the epistemological groundings of audience studies, it is worth asking if such a separation really serves the purpose of the author: Isn’t she herself attempting, in some way, to “queer the medium” by claiming that TV can be queer?

‘The pedagogy of...’: queer TV as teacher?

The first chapter situates us historically, going over the last three decades in terms of U.S. queer televisual representation, marking the 90s as its emergence, the 2000s as its becoming mainstream through normalization and depoliticization—*gaystreaming*—and asking if the 2010s could be dubbed a “Golden Age of Queer Representation.” The rest of the book analyzes several TV shows through a pedagogical exploration—singling out narrative elements which serve as titles or subtitles and presenting them as “... as pedagogy/pedagogical tool” or “the pedagogy of...” and thus creating efficient rhythm and coherence.

The chapter lineup makes for a collection of close readings of the shows analyzed, one show per chapter. For each of them, Parsemain exhaustively and carefully points out what stands for positive (i.e. “progressive,” nuanced, non-stereotypical, marginal, anti-oppressive, critical, non-normative) and negative (i.e. “bigoted,” stereotypical, too mainstream, oppressive, normative) representations of queerness. Within such a structure, queer TV is portrayed as a nuanced teacher who guides its students through consideration of multiple points of view and facets of characters, plots, and narrative elements such as melodrama, reality and realism. This teacher highlights the complexities of profoundly portrayed identities, picks up on shallow, stereotypical, harmful representations, and also leaves room for ambiguity of interpretation and a commitment that is ethical and caring rather than moral and prescriptive (p. 10).

Importantly for the premise of this book, tethered to the pedagogical potential of discrete narrative elements of entertainment, Parsemain offers a nuanced account of how such elements both deepen and foreclose engaged understandings of queerness. Following this thread, every chapter ends on a formal weighing of the good and the bad, of the possibilities for critical understandings of the shows as well as the reaffirmation of oppressive discourses. Throughout this structure, Parsemain is able to relate her analysis not only to broader issues of sexuality and gender, but also of race, class and social mobility, thereby successfully “linking private and personal matters to broader societal problems” (p. 40).

She also guides her readers through a larger world of representations by mobilizing the notion of “cross-textual seriality by linking different representations of queerness across the medium” (p. 13). She thus goes beyond each single show portrayed and keeps relating and contrasting them with myriad others throughout the entire book, making for a very convincing, coherent, well-rounded argument that does not limit itself to the eight main shows analyzed. However as previously stated, the book remains limited to television production and reception in the United States. As such, it assumes notions of queerness and pedagogy that stem from this specific sociocultural context, which is more often than none premised upon a teleological narrative of neoliberal progress and individual betterment, and less on a systemic, critical understanding of the social production of (queer) identities.

Pedagogy/ecology

This ecological rendition of Parsemain’s analysis—the way she keeps connecting



Transparent: "The ensemble of characters is crucial because it alleviates the limitations of the lead. Through its ensemble cast, *Transparent* represents a wide range of queer identities, highlights the importance of community and addresses social issues that affect many LGBT+ people, like health problems, abuse, depression, suicide, addiction, poverty and social precarity." (p. 210)



Sense8: "Without losing their sense of self, the sensates challenge narrow identity categories. Through them, the text promotes a broader and more fluid conception of the self and privileges universalism over individual or socio-cultural differences" (p. 229)

threads and highlighting common/divergent processes within a complex, fictional inter-world-system of interlocking meanings—is probably the strongest element of her work. However, the same ecological sensibility is not applied to the notion of pedagogy. Parsemain, in her portrayal of TV as teacher, fails to recognize that TV is not pedagogical on its own, not really a teacher. Even as her book is an undoubtedly useful tool within an ecology of critical, queer and anti-oppressive approaches to pedagogy, such an ecology is left undefined as the necessary environment in which her book might actually get to work. She does an outstanding job at pointing out the pedagogical potential of TV but leaves us empty-handed as to the ways in which such an analysis can be pedagogically taken up. Although such a decision, again, stems coherently from a commitment to audience studies, where the audience might act as an endpoint, the book might have benefited from a slightly deeper engagement with critical pedagogical scholarship.

Looking for “real” change

The specter of audience studies shapes another element of this book, which is the author's investment in the language of measurable outcomes and “real change.” TV-as-teacher, within this language, should lead to societal and individual change prompted by understanding and interpreting its pedagogy. Noticeable effects like “a broader acceptance” or “promoting acceptance,” constantly mentioned in the text, signal how Parsemain conceptualizes anti-oppressive change in relatively narrow terms (especially given the fact that such language is often accompanied by “LGBT+”, a strong marker of liberal progressive considerations characterized by a decidedly un-queer discursive economy). Feminist and queer critique of progressive social policy has already pointed out how discourses trying to measure outcomes of anti-phobic trainings and resources through questionnaires and based on short term cycles actually merchandize measurable outcomes treated as ideological profit. The change that the author hopes to instill in viewers is often expressed through the notion of self-reflexivity, which she wants to occur in the center of the relation between queer TV and its audience. While she is precisely right about the importance of viewers' self-reflexivity within a process of anti-oppressive change, its definition and the conditions of that term's use remain muted. Its presence within the televisual process appears as a given, which leaves the reader without an actual idea of how self-reflexivity might emerge from representation.

Conclusion

Parsemain, in *The Pedagogy of Queer TV*, offers a comprehensive, finely studied and pedagogically useful account of last decade's multiple universes of queer televisual representation in the United States and their educative accomplishments and possibilities. Although the book sometimes reifies pedagogy as a stand-alone process in a somehow static relation with televisual representation, it does an incredible labor at dissecting with nuance and ambivalence the minutiae of complex queer worlds and characters. It is also enlightening in terms of how it describes our changing relation to television, a medium deeply tied to the social reality of a slowly vanishing 20th century. Indeed, television acts as the ultimate figure of Western domestic economies of representation and leisure which, in the past 20 years at least, have been overwhelmed by numerous sociopolitical and cultural paradigm shifts. As new

aesthetics of performance and spectacle emerge on screens that have nothing to do with television, this book shows us how we are, no matter how differently or queerly, still intimately connected and committed to TV.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Title design for *Sex Education*. The title appears over an aerial shot of the River Wye in Wales.



Title design for *Schitt's Creek*. The title appears against a solid black background to the sounds of a tuba.



The auditorium of Moordale High, which is reminiscent of many a filmic U.S. high school.

Better worlds: queer pedagogy and utopia in *Sex Education* and *Schitt's Creek*

by [Tanya Horeck](#)

"Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined, and maybe realized."

—Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (2002, 18)

This essay focuses on Netflix feel-good comedies *Sex Education* (Laurie Nunn, 2019-) and *Schitt's Creek* (Eugene Levy and Dan Levy, 2015-2020) as important examples of twenty-first century serialized TV shows that use humour and positive affect to centre queer perspectives. Both series prominently feature gay characters (with *Sex Education* in particular including a diverse range of LGBTQ+ protagonists), but their more significant intervention, I want to argue, comes from how they challenge heteronormativity as an idealized form of sexual and social relation. Significantly, however, this challenge is not located in social realism or didacticism. Rather, it is delivered through the comedic tone and affective atmospherics of both series, where the narratives locate progressive ideas in the way they develop utopian, queerer worlds.

Sex Education and *Schitt's Creek* are the debut series of their millennial creators, Laurie Nunn and Dan Levy. *Sex Education* is British and is filmed in South Wales but it is set in an unspecified locale called "Moordale." Showrunner Nunn has said that U.S. teen TV shows and films, including *Freaks and Geeks* and the catalogue of John Hughes' movies, influenced her decision to set *Sex Education* in a fictionalized space and place of a "high school" with a blend of British accents and an U.S. style "ambience" (Dalton 2019). [[open notes and bibliography in new page](#)] However, the transatlantic blend did not sit well with everyone: when the first series was released, it was criticized for what some saw as an attempt to pander to U.S. audiences (Salmon 2019; Atkinson 2020). *Schitt's Creek* is Canadian, and it is filmed in Canada with a Canadian cast and crew but set in the titular Schitt's Creek— a small town never precisely located in either Canada or the United States. Its setting has faced less criticism over the writers' leaving the location of the town unspecified, although many fan comments speculate where it is set (especially, I think, Canadian fans eager to confirm its Canadianness).[1] When pressed about the location, showrunner Levy explains that "pinning the location down wasn't ever part of the narrative of the show"; it was intentionally meant to "exist in this sort of isolated bubble" (qtd. in Mack 2018).

The unspecified locale of both shows fits with what some view as Netflix's wider transnational strategy to level out national and regional differences in order to appeal to a global audience (Jenner 2018, 219-40). Though *Schitt's Creek* began as a CBC creative venture, its first two seasons were picked up by Netflix in 2017,

followed by its full drop release of its subsequent four seasons, in what Levy has described as a “game changer” in terms of securing the show’s worldwide success (Adalian 2020). However, I suggest there is a more critical, subversive edge to the unspecified locales of both *Schitt’s Creek* and *Sex Education*, which cannot simply be accounted for—or dismissed—as part of Netflix’s corporate marketing plan. I argue that their non-specific locations are fundamental to the utopic queer spaces carved out by both shows.

In response to the criticism that *Sex Education* is Americanized, Nunn notes that: “Moordale’s not a real place: it’s almost like a comic book, a teenage utopia” (qtd. in Levine 2019).[2] And the show’s director, and one of its script writers, Ben Taylor, frames this teen utopia in explicitly queer terms:

“I don’t think we are a straight show, and I don’t think the story of [Asa Butterfield’s] Otis at its centre would be believable if you were having this harder-nosed, grey rendering of what it’s like to go to school in the UK in 2019” (qtd. in Maine 2019).

Dan Levy similarly frames the utopian world of *Schitt’s Creek* in relation to its queer politics and pedagogy and in particular to its steadfast refusal to depict homophobia:

“We show love and tolerance. If you put something like that out of the equation, you’re saying that doesn’t exist and shouldn’t exist” (qtd. in Ivie 2018).

While the absence of homophobia as a theme in *Schitt’s Creek* is a major point of difference when compared to *Sex Education*’s pedagogical approach to the problem (as I will discuss further), both shows nonetheless operate in what Glyn Davis and Gary Needham refer to as a “queer register” (2008, 6). Their queerness extends beyond the depiction of their explicitly gay characters—to the role of fashion and costuming, the use of mise-en-scene, performance, and the queer re-orientation of communal and social space. Resisting a “TV movie of the week” educational approach, in which moral lessons are derived from limited, time-constrained plotlines involving gay protagonists (who then often disappear),[3] what these series offer instead is a far more radical form of critical queer pedagogy rooted in a serialized dramedy approach committed to decentring heteronormativity across episodes and seasons.



The Rose family living in close quarters, mirroring the conditions of life during the coronavirus pandemic.

Sex Education dropped its second series—and *Schitt’s Creek* its sixth and final one—on Netflix during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic and were subsequently received by the mainstream media as being among the “best TV series to binge-watch in lockdown” (Keishin Armstrong 2020). Both TV shows have seemed to provide much needed solace during the stresses of 2020, with *Schitt’s Creek* almost mirroring the experience of families being locked in together (McNamara 2020). However, what tends to go undiscussed in the celebration of these series as becoming more important during lockdown, is how the comfort they provide relates to their status as queer texts. In her recent discussion of escapist film spectatorship during the pandemic, Caetlin Benson-Allott argues that queer films are especially powerful as a form of escapist viewing because of their “conjuring of alternative temporalities,” which operate outside of

“chrononormativity” and its restrictive emphasis on linear trajectories oriented around white heterosexual dynamics and resolutions (2020, 77-78).

In the essay that follows, I argue that *Sex Education* and *Schitt's Creek* offer an effective, politically motivated form of escapist viewing, with their queer utopias fulfilling a desire for an alternative time and future. The queer futurity of these shows are televisual embodiments of theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz’s “critical idealism,” which posits queerness as a “structured and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (2009, 1, 2). As Muñoz writes in his account of the potentialities of queer futurity,

“queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009, 1).

In their striving for alternative possibilities, *Sex Education* and *Schitt's Creek* exemplify Muñoz’s argument that utopian feelings of hope are “indispensable to the act of imaging transformation” (2009, 9).

Sex Education

In its two seasons to date, *Sex Education* displays an array of LGBTQ+ experiences: it explores gay sexuality, lesbian sexuality, bisexuality, asexuality, and pansexuality. Within this smorgasbord of sexualities, it looks at a panoply of sex acts and related practices including but not limited to, penis-vagina sex, fingering, anal sex, oral sex, strap-on dildo sex, masturbation, and BDSM. Additionally, there are episodes that touch upon issues including: sexually transmitted diseases, erectile dysfunction, Viagra-induced erections, vaginismus, anal douching, the morning after pill, homophobia, abortion, porn, slut shaming, image-based sexual abuse, and sexual assault. *Sex Education* also weaves in the sexual stories and issues of the parents and teachers, which are almost as varied as those of the teens. All of these aspects of sexuality are explored through a comedic modality, and through well-established character arcs and storylines developed across seasons. The cast of *Sex Education* is notably diverse, as are the writing and production team behind the camera, which is “predominantly female and notably BAME [Black, Asian, and minority ethnic]” (Famurewa 2020).

The premise of *Sex Education* is that male teenager, Otis Milburn (Asa Butterfield), the son of a sex therapist mother, Dr Jean Milburn (Gillian Anderson), starts a thriving business doling out sex advice to his fellow high schoolers. Ironically, while he is very good at psychoanalysing the sexual anxieties and fantasies of his fellow pupils, Otis himself has no sexual experience. The sex advice clinic is the brain child of Otis’s business partner—the entrepreneurially minded, self-sufficient, and ultra-cool feminist intellectual Maeve Wiley (Emma Mackey).

Although the show revolves around the awkward and privileged Otis, who is white, straight, and male, I contend that it does so with a view to denaturalizing heterosexuality. In particular, the sex therapy conceit enables the show to quickly open up to encompass a kaleidoscope of different sexual identities, activities, and practices. Heterosexuality in *Sex Education* is presented as one of many different kinds of orientation and ways of being in the world. Indeed, within the first five minutes of the pilot episode, viewers are introduced to the gay and black Eric Effiong (Ncuti Gatwa; he playfully questions Otis about Otis’ inability to masturbate; we hear them as the two ride their bikes to school with Eric’s signature raucous laughter echoing in the air. The series resists the token gay



Maeve and Otis, partners in an underground business that doles out sex advice to teenagers. Their will they/won't they romance is one of the narrative arcs of the series.



Best friends Otis and Eric redefine the dynamics of male friendship in teen drama.



Otis and Eric riding their bikes to school, as Eric gently teases Otis about his penis problems.



"Where's the spunk, Adam?" A frustrated and confused Aimee enquires after her boyfriend Adam's failure to ejaculate.



Jean Milburn in therapy mode: "So tell me, Margery, how are you getting on with your penis?"



Otis acknowledging to his two lesbian classmates that he is not "well-versed in the intricacies of lesbian sexual relations." Nonetheless he wants to learn more about their emotional relationship in order to help them.

black best friend trope by making Eric a central character and exploring his intersectional experiences as a gay man with religious Ghanaian-Nigerian parents. An idea of "difference" is not located in Eric or in any one character who is then made to bear the burden of tokenism for the show.

In other words, *Sex Education* resists according Otis's straight white male experience any kind of dominance; instead the plotlines indicate that heterosexuality is as contingent as any other form of sexuality, something which Otis himself strongly recognizes. In fact, the first episode frames white male heterosexual experience in the context of "failure" (Otis' failure to masturbate and Adam's [Connor Swindell] failure to orgasm with his girlfriend). However, despite the narrative focus on how people deal with sexual problems or concerns, *Sex Education* does not fetishize an idea of success. This aspect of the scripting proceeds like the argument developed in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) by Jack Halberstam, who makes the case for the value of failure in regard to queer transformation and counter-politics. As Halberstam argues, a notion of failure resists the "cultural logics of success" and is key to forming an alternative pedagogy "that presumes and indeed demands equality rather than hierarchy" (2011, 13). By exploring the sexual "failures" of its young cast of characters in a humorous light, *Sex Education* presents what Halberstam describes as a "new kind of optimism" (2011, 5). Such optimism resists the facile mantra of individual "positive thinking" (Halberstam, 2011, 4-5), and instead asks us to consider how failure can be productive in terms of generating new forms of knowledge.

Sex Education disseminates knowledge about queerness (Parsemain 2019) through consistently destabilizing a notion of heteronormative sex in two important ways. First, it depicts a range of what Freud might term "polymorphously perverse" (Rycroft 1968, 121-122) sexual practices and activities in a nuanced, sensitive, and funny manner. Second, it models responses to non-normative sex acts and issues through the calm, open, and rational therapeutic responses of Jean and Otis. Both Jean and Otis, in their different ways, use their therapeutic practice to open up a dialogue with their clients, rather than assume a position of superiority and dominance over them. As a TV show *Sex Education* does much the same, resisting hierarchies of knowledge and casting "education and social transformation as mutually dependent" (Halberstam 2011, 14).

Sex Education's exploration of an array of queer sexualities and activities that are not commonly given media representation has been rightfully heralded critically. To give one example, the show has been praised for its depiction of an asexual character, Florence (Mirren Mack), in season 2, episode 4. Florence feels worried and isolated because she does not share the same desire for sex as those around her. Jean accurately identifies Florence as asexual; when Florence says that she feels "broken" because she does not want to have sex with anyone, Jean tells her: "Sex doesn't make us whole. And so, how could you ever be broken?" In another example from the pilot episode, Jean notices that Otis has been faking masturbation and tells him that he can talk to her about it because "this is not a place of judgement" but a "safe space." While it would be impossible for any TV show to create an entirely "safe space" for all, Jean's remark nonetheless encapsulates *Sex Education's* approach to instructing its young audience about sex. It eschews cautionary tales and the heterosexual strictures of so many coming of age teen films and TV shows as it opts for an openly queer—and feminist—approach to sex education.

It is instructive to consider how *Sex Education's* pedagogy relates to new ways of thinking about Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) for young people. For example, the UK, from where I am writing, has recently had an overhaul of sex education, and a new mandatory RSE was due to be introduced in schools in



Florence feels isolated because of her asexuality. However, sex therapist Jean does not judge Florence and nor does *Sex Education*, which is inclusive and respectful of different ways of being in the world.



"Sweetheart, I noticed you're pretending to masturbate..." Mother/therapist Jean tells Otis he can tell her anything and that their conversation is a "safe space."



After finding out Eric isn't into girls, Lily rolls with it and suggests they do a makeover instead.

September 2020 (its official launch postponed by Covid-19). This revamped RSE is designed to take into account LGBTQ+ identities and relationships, acknowledge the digital context and lack of distinction between "online" and "offline" for young people, and stress "the importance of recognising and having a zero-tolerance policy towards sexism and sexual violence" ("Sexplain's Response" 2019). However, *Sex Education* is able to go considerably further than the RSE curriculum—which even in its new guise still tends to depict sex through the frame of monogamous relationships/marriage and it deemphasizes notions of pleasure (ibid.). Often, the time spent by youth now viewing screens comes under attack, especially in terms of worries over young people's isolation (family members in different rooms watching different programmes on different screens and devices) and access to damaging material (porn etc.).[4] In this moment, queer TV can have a role in public pedagogy, using a "sex positive"[5] approach to sex education and emphasizing the pleasure, diversity and fluidity of consensual sexual experience.[6]

Striking a balance between the sweet, the sexually frank, and the educative (Phillipson 2019) is something that *Sex Education* does adeptly through its creation of a certain comedic tone and mood. According to film theorist Robert Sinnerbrink, mood

"is how a (fictional) world is expressed or disclosed via a shared affective attunement orienting the spectator within that world" (2012,148).

Indeed, serialized TV arguably has even more space and time to build, develop, and consolidate its fictional world than film does, creating atmospherics through repetition over the course of episodes and seasons. The affective tone and mood of *Sex Education* is central to how it positions both queer and non-queer audiences to occupy the shared space of its utopic queer world.

My exploration of how *Sex Education* directs viewers to engage affectively with its queer reorientation of sex draws from Carrie Rentschler's definition of affect as an emphasis on "how things feel, for whom and with what potential" (2017, 12). As an example, consider Episode 3 of the first season. Lily (Tanya Reynolds), a female teen who writes tentacle porn in her spare time, goes home with Eric after band practice in the hopes that, to borrow her wording, he will put his penis into her vagina. When a shocked Eric tells her he is gay, a momentarily flummoxed Lily, who has taken her top off, puts it back on, shrugs, and suggests they do a make-over instead. A few scenes later we are back in Eric's bedroom where Eric and Lily have dressed in flamboyant attire and adorned themselves in sparkly makeup. At Lily's request, the pair are watching gay porn together, specifically, gay "rimming" porn. "What's that? Oh, I see," Lily says, tilting her head in interest, running her tongue across her lips as there is a flash of the act in question on Eric's computer. The scene concludes when Eric's father, Mr Effiong (DeObia Oparei) enters the room with tea and biscuits. Upon seeing the two watching gay porn in their colourful costumes, he suggests it's time for Lily to go home, and then he tells Eric he needs to grow up and that his son should wash the make-up off before his mother gets home. The father is notably restrained in his scolding and shows a level of care and understanding as he hands Eric the cup of tea he came to bring him in the first place.

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In a twist on the classic makeover trope of teen film, after Eric and Lily make themselves over they watch gay porn together. It is a surprisingly wholesome scene which captures Lily's sexual curiosity.



Mr. Effiong scolds Eric but also shows him care.

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The show's utopian impulses are expressed through experimentation with fashion and costumes, as demonstrated in this image of Eric ready to go out in his Hedwig costume.



Otis in his Hedwig costume for Eric's 17th birthday in another example of how *Sex Education* rewrites conventional scripts of male friendship.



Eric in his spectacular kente suit from Ghana at the school dance where he proudly asserts his identity.

For me, this curiously wholesome scene captures how *Sex Education* works to acclimatise the viewer to its queer perspective on sex through its comedic modality and through what can be described as its consistently sweet and sunny mood across its first two seasons. *Sex Education's* mood is articulated through dialogue and story arc, but also through mise-en-scene, editing, musical soundtrack, performance and camera work. I've described the scene above in relation to characters and narrative, but none of it would work the way it does—to promote and foster a queer world view—if viewers were not already primed for it through the series' "mood cues" (to borrow a term from Sinnerbrink). As Sinnerbrink notes, moods last longer than emotions and "prime us for having and repeating emotions or clusters of emotional states."

"Mood and emotion thus tend to work together in synergy, mood priming us for having emotions, while emotional bursts sustain and renew our background mood" (2012, 153).

While the visibility it assigns to its queer *characters* is undeniably important, what I am suggesting here is that the non-representational aspects of *Sex Education* are equally as significant for expressing the show's queer politics. As Richard Dyer writes about entertainment, it does not present a blueprint or model for a utopian world in the way of a Thomas More:

"Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would *feel like* rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the *level of sensibility*, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production" (2002, 18).

The queer utopianism of both *Sex Education* and *Schitt's Creek* resides in their affective sensibilities, which attune viewers to the joy and possibilities of alternative modes of being. For example, *Sex Education's* utopian impulses and sensibilities are vividly expressed through costume, especially the colourful clothes and ensembles of Eric. In a short video on YouTube, Ncuti Gatwa discusses Eric's "emotional journey through fashion," [7] [[open endnotes in new page](#)] in a segment that demonstrates the show's own critical awareness of costuming as a crucial part of its emotional mood aesthetic. In Episode 5 of the first season, for Eric's 17th birthday Otis and Eric dress up in cosplay to go and see the queer cult film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. After Otis stands him up for Maeve, Eric becomes a victim of a homophobic/transphobic assault by a white man. After this assault, Eric wears duller, less flamboyant clothes for a period of time as he processes the trauma. However, in Episode 7, after an affirming chance encounter with an older black man in drag attire, and after a positive, joyous experience with his community at his local church, Eric arrives at the school dance in a spectacular kente suit from Ghana, replete with Nigerian head-dress, and sparkling gold make-up. Although his father expresses fear for his son's safety given his outré ensemble, their conversation outside the high school ends with another strong statement of care, as Mr Effiong tells Eric that he is learning from him about how to be brave. The show provides an image of father and son embracing; they are watched by the troubled, closeted Adam, who does not have any such support from his own father. This family moment is followed by a sequence in which the best friends, Eric and Otis, dance together, as their classmates watch on. The music, by trans bisexual musician Ezra Furman—who



Father and son hugging it out outside the school dance.

performs covers but also writes new music for *Sex Education*—is central to the queer register and mood of this scene and of the series as a whole (Mayer 2020). [8] Otis and Eric’s bodies moving together with laughter and love offers a poignant example of how *Sex Education* presents a queer reorientation of bodily attachments and social space.



Troubled Adam, whose own father is controlling and emotionally distant, watches on as Eric and his father bond.



Otis and Eric dancing together to the music of trans artist Ezra Furman in a joyous example of how the series performs a queer reorientation of public space.

In addition to narratively and connotatively using costume, the show also does this with its treatment of space. Thematically *Sex Education* concerns itself with how some spaces are made habitable or inhabitable for certain bodies and it traces how marginalized bodies might find different ways of taking up space. In her discussion of queer phenomenology, Sara Ahmed has discussed the importance of spatiality in thinking about sexual orientation and the ways in which “bodies and spaces” are “orientated” in certain directions. As she writes:

“The work of inhabitation involves orientation devices; ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space” (2006, 11).



Viv providing her friends (and the *Sex Education* audience) with statistics on girls and unwanted sexual attention.

Significantly, *Sex Education*’s queering of public space is performed in an alliance with feminism. Through one of its female characters, Viv (Chinenye Ezeudu), *Sex Education* acknowledges the statistic that “two thirds of girls experience unwanted sexual attention or contact in public spaces before the age of 21,” but it never traps its female characters inside that statistic. It allows them to own their own stories and to resist the patriarchal direction and curtailment of their use of public space. For example, in a storyline about image-based abuse in season one, Episode 5, Ruby (Mimi Keene), one of the cliquey “mean girls” at the high school, becomes distressed when a boy circulates an image of her vagina without her consent. Everyone in the school looks at the vagina image on their smart phones. The vagina image is however anonymous as it were. Then, in the final moments of the show, in an act of Spartacus-style solidarity, many of the girls—and a boy or two as well—lay claim to the vagina/vulva image during a school assembly, standing up one by one to declare: “It’s my vagina!” This scene, in which students hijack a high school in a gesture of communal solidarity against non-consensual image-sharing, is a powerful example of how *Sex Education* produces utopic images in order to politically interfere with dominant cultural scripts. Sexual double standards are subverted through the use of humour. The pedagogical modelling of a public response to image-based abuse shifts emphasis away from individual victim blaming.



“It’s my vagina!” Students hijack the school assembly in a gesture of communal solidarity against non-consensual image-sharing.

In Season 2, there is a similar reshaping of public space through collective solidarity in the show’s treatment of a sexual assault storyline involving the character Aimee (Aimee Lou Wood), who gets on a crowded bus where a male stranger masturbates onto her jeans.[9] Over the course of five episodes, *Sex Education* explores how Aimee copes with the aftermath of this assault which she



A traumatized Aimee, after a stranger masturbates onto her favourite pair of jeans on the bus.





The damaged jeans.



Clothes as tactile, affective objects: Aimee strokes her jeans as memories of her trauma rise to the surface.

is at first reluctant to even name as such, only going to the police station at the urging of Maeve. After the assault, Aimee is concerned that she won't get back her beloved jeans, which she describes as "the perfect bootleg." Here, and elsewhere in the series, clothing items serve as an affective articulation of a character's embodied feelings. In a scene I will shortly discuss, in which Aimee shares the story of her assault with her girlfriends, her recollection of the trauma notably begins with a shot of her touching the side of her blue jeans. As So Mayer notes, whether it is Aimee's treasured blue jeans or Lily's lovingly designed "vagina hats" for the queer musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* that concludes season 2, clothing assumes a tactile, haptic significance and is central to "the show's fantasy of a largely queer-positive, racism-free rural British secondary school" (2020, 34). Playing a pivotal role in establishing the queer tone and mood of *Sex Education*, items of clothing function as "beloved objects that, through both superlative production design and performances, reach out and touch the viewer" (Mayer 2020, 34).

The use of clothing as a source of both affective and political expression is prevalent throughout *Sex Education*, as, for example, in Maeve's punk/grunge look of short skirts, ripped tights, combat boots and leather jacket. This look discloses the series' feminist worldview, and it is even given its own origin story in the cold open to Episode 7 of Season 2. There the scene flashes back to a younger Maeve, in shorts, walking through the trailer park where she lives, as a group of boys jeer and cat call. When an older woman tells young Maeve she should be "careful dressing like that," Maeve retorts: "And you should be careful perpetuating old-fashioned patriarchal ideology." An older Maeve tells her friends: "So I went home and cut them [the shorts] even shorter. Because fuck them." Narratively Maeve's story of sexual harassment and feminist resistance, is related in the context of a bonding session in the library, in which a group of female students, of different races, classes, sexualities, sizes, shapes, backgrounds and experiences, share how sexual assault or the threat of sexual assault, has curtailed their movement through the public spaces of the bus, the train station, the street, the internet, the swimming pool, and the trailer park. Initiated by Aimee's revelation that she is afraid to get back on the bus after being sexually assaulted, the sequence uses montage and flashback, intercut with powerful commentary from the young women on their embodied responses to incidents of sexual harassment. The collective narration in this feminist reworking of *The Breakfast Club's* (Hughes, US, 1985) detention scene importantly contextualizes Aimee's sexual assault in relation to a wider rape culture that normalizes violence against women.

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| <p>Maeve's feminist punk aesthetic.</p> | <p><i>Sex Education</i> uses flashbacks in the sexual assault episode to make critical links between the past, present, and future. Young Maeve's defiant response to the trailer park boys' sexual leering.</p> |
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| Young Maeve in shorts that she cuts even shorter in a gesture of feminist defiance. | Detention room scene where Aimee's sexual assault revelation leads to group bonding over experiences of non-consensual penises. |



Back on the bus: a powerful and touching image of female solidarity.



Adam is the high school's resident bully.

In the episode's final scene, with the help of her female classmates, Aimee finds the strength to get back on the bus: the final shot is of the young women close together as they fill up the back seat (to the soundtrack of Sharon Van Etten's *Seventeen*). The resolution of Aimee's trauma over five episodes might be seen as too neat and uplifting a conclusion to a story of sexual assault. However, the young women's recognition of a common problem of "non-consensual penises," and their use of wit, humour and female camaraderie as ways of reclaiming public space, are reflective of recent feminist research on how girls and women find innovative ways to "challenge contemporary sexism, misogyny and rape culture" in the #MeToo era (Mendes, Ringrose and Kellner 2019, 2). The political purchase of images of the young women together—walking down the steps of the school arm to arm, smashing up old cars with baseball bats in a junk yard and crowding onto a seat on the bus—lies in how they demonstrate the creative and resilient practices of young women as they push back against a culture that does not want them to take up space. In giving us joyful and resistant images of queer and feminist solidarity in the midst of societal circumscription, *Sex Education* rethinks forms and spaces of sociality. What is at stake here, to reference Muñoz, is the idea of "potentiality" as an affective structure, which produces "utopian feeling" as a way of displacing political pessimism and imagining social transformation (2009, 3-4).

Given the emphasis I have placed here on the importance of *Sex Education's* strategic optimism, non-shaming narratives and sex-positivity, I also want to speak to its criticised homophobia storyline involving Adam, who is the son of the stern headmaster at Moordale High. Throughout the first series Adam bullies Eric, steals his lunch, uses homophobic slurs, and in one egregious incident, dumps dog shit all over Eric's family's car. Yet at the end of series one, Adam gives Eric a blow job during a joint detention session and it becomes clear that Adam is secretly queer (in season 2 he will acknowledge he is bisexual). He has masked his sexual feelings for Eric through internalised homophobia (his sexual desire for Eric is in fact strongly signposted from the very first episode). In season 2 there is a romantic story arc about their burgeoning relationship and in the final



Adam and Eric have sex during detention in a problematic storyline in which homophobic bullying is seen to conceal gay love.



Season 2 provides Eric with another love interest in the form of the suave and confident Rahim.



The Roses, upon learning they have lost their vast fortune.

episode of that season Adam makes a public declaration of his affection for Eric during the school performance of the glorious queer space opera.

Some critics have taken issue with the show's use of the "closeted bully myth." In an article in *Vice*, for example, Josh Bullin argues that

"a homophobic bully is unlikely to eventually proclaim their love for their victim...To present a relationship as such to a teenage audience is a dangerous fantasy that goes against the titular sex education the show seeks to provide" (2020).

I agree that it is important to acknowledge the wider implications of this internalised homophobic storyline, particularly if Eric and Adam are to become reified as an iconic TV teen gay couple. But it is also worth acknowledging that *Sex Education* makes use of the serialized form to demonstrate critical development and self-awareness of the limitations of its own use of the "outdated aggression-equals-love trope" (Pham 2019). In season 2, it critically addresses Adam's bullying. Upon learning of Eric's detention sex with Adam, and of his growing romantic feelings for him, a dismayed Otis reminds Eric that Adam bullied him and was "a horrible person." Season 2 also gives Eric another love interest in the figure of the cool and confident Rahim. Still, *Sex Education's* problematic internalized homophobia storyline is an interesting point of contrast with the queer utopia presented in *Schitt's Creek*, which resolutely refuses to depict homophobia of any kind. As I will now go on to discuss, this conscious decision not to use shaming narratives is a central part of *Schitt's Creek's* queer pedagogy, which unfolds through the construction of a utopian story world that seeks to undo binary oppositions between straight and gay, normative and non-normative.

Schitt's Creek

Schitt's Creek might not contain the same amount of diversity and queer sex as *Sex Education* but it shares that show's comedic modality and its use of a rosy-mood aesthetic to affectively "attune" spectators (to borrow Sinnerbrink's language) to a queer worldview. In brief, *Schitt's Creek* tells the story of the Roses, a rich family who lose their fortune when their business manager fails to pay their taxes. Finding themselves homeless, Johnny Rose (played by co-creator Eugene Levy), Moira Rose (Catherine O'Hara), and their two adult children, David (Dan Levy) and Alexis (Annie Murphy), move into two rooms in a motel in the titular Hicksville town that Johnny jokingly bought for David for a birthday gift one year.

Where *Sex Education* has a range of queer characters, *Schitt's Creek* has David Rose (played by showrunner Dan Levy), a character who identifies as pansexual, meaning that he is sexually attracted to people on an individual basis regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. In episode 10 of season one, "Honeymoon," David comes out as pansexual to Stevie (Emily Hampshire), the female hotel manager and one of the central characters on *Schitt's Creek*, after they have sex. He uses a wine analogy to explain his sexuality, telling Stevie (who had initially assumed he was gay) that he likes both red wine *and* white wine and also the "occasional rosé" and a "merlot that used to be a chardonnay." When Stevie says, "so you're just really open to all the wines," David replies that he likes "the wine and not the label, does that make sense?" to which Stevie agrees that it does. The "characters just kind of shrug and move on" (Truesdale 2015), as does the show.

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The inimitable David Rose.



David tells Stevie he likes ALL the wine as a way of identifying himself as pansexual.



Schitt's Creek generates comedy from the social friction between the locals and the snooty Roses.

While *Schitt's Creek* develops the “fish out of water” storyline for comic effect, it portrays the town as caring and open (Schaab 2020). Ultimately it is the Roses who have to adjust their white elitist behaviours and expectations in line with the community-oriented, socialist aims and ideals of the town (Schabb 2020). Just as *Sex Education* attempts to craft a “safe space” in its imaginary high school utopia, *Schitt's Creek* creates a “safe haven” in the shape of its idealized small community, which is presented as a place of “universal tolerance and equality” (Linnell 2019a). Significantly, the show’s professed aim to change social attitudes about queer sexuality (Schaab 2020; Ahearn 2018) does not involve trite moral lessons or a preoccupation with storylines about gay “issues.” Rather, its pedagogy is most forcefully realised in its restructuring of social relations around an ethics of care. The show’s fantasy of love and acceptance should not, therefore, be understood as an effort to escape from present-day reality but rather as an attempt to “map future social relations” (Muñoz 2009, 1). *Schitt's Creek* demonstrates the political promise of Muñoz’s queer “potentiality” as an anticipatory affective structure which activates hope through the critical generation of utopian feelings (Muñoz 2009, 7, 3), especially through its portrayal of the romantic relationship between David and Patrick (Noah Reid).

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Patrick and David saying "cheers" with their mozzarella sticks on their adorable first date at the diner.



David takes charge and kisses Patrick at the end of the date.



At the "Open Mic" night, David and Moira are initially worried about the cringe-factor.

While in Season 2 the series briefly explores a "thruple" sexual situation between Stevie, David, and a man they meet called Jake, in Season 3, David falls in love with Patrick. They share their first kiss in the season's finale and over the subsequent seasons their relationship evolves and gives shape to the overall story arc of the show. In Season 4, Episode 6, ("Open Mic"), in what has been described as the "most romantic scene on TV" (Vick 2018), Patrick serenades David to an acoustic version of Tina Turner's "Simply the Best." The "Open Mic" night is the grand opening of Rose Apothecary (the locally sourced shop co-owned by David and Patrick), and is attended by David's family as well as the townspeople. When Patrick prepares to sing, David's mother, Moira Rose, is quick with her usual disdain to which David responds with his standard eye-rolling derision. But then, when Patrick begins to sing to David, both mother and son are totally swept up in it, and in one especially touching moment, Moira reaches out to touch David's arm. The exchange of looks throughout this scene is significant, particularly Moira's look of love and happiness for David as she watches him watch his lover sing to him: "That's my son's butter-voiced beau," she tells Roland (Chris Elliott) and Jocelyn (Jennifer Robertson), the town's mayor and his wife, with pride.



Patrick sweetly serenading David to an acoustic version of Tina Turner's "Simply the Best."



David and Moira are moved by the singing.



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| David's utter delight as shown through close up. | The townspeople watch on with affection and serve as surrogates for the audience of <i>Sex Education</i> . |



Patrick's parents: modelling a caring parental response to coming out.

A queer re-orientation of public space is normalized and a new power of acceptance rendered palpable: the townspeople watch on with affection as they share in the awe (and the “aw”) of the moment. The scene’s affective power comes from how the queer love on display is unquestioningly supported and communally bolstered. This sets an affective tone for the rest of the series, which invites the audience to assume the same position as the spectators at the Open Mic night at Rose Apothecary, watching on with affection as Patrick and David (and also, Alexis & Ted, Moira & Johnny, David & Stevie and so on) love one another.

Both *Sex Education* and *Schitt's Creek* challenge a common heterosexist notion that being LGBTQ+ makes life more difficult. Such an idea pre-circumscribes a vision of the world as straight and gives credence and energy to that which needs to be denounced—homophobia. Consider, for example, how *Schitt's Creek* approaches Patrick’s coming out to his parents (Season 5, Episode 11, “Meet the Parents”). When it emerges that his parents do not know that their adult son, previously engaged to a woman, is now in a relationship with a man, David has a concern that things might turn “very dark”—as he puts it. But the scriptwriters are too politically astute to let that happen. Instead, through Patrick’s parents, the show models what a caring parental response to a child coming out should look like: “You are the only thing in the world that matters to us, and if David makes you happy that’s all we care about.” Where other shows might generate conflict around the experience of coming out, *Schitt's Creek* fashions gentle acceptance; upon learning that Patrick hasn’t yet told his parents, David is supportive and nurturing rather than scolding or shaming.

While David and Patrick are in a conventional, monogamous relationship, and ultimately get married in the series’ final episode, their coupledness is not rendered in “homonormative” terms. “Homonormativity,” as Lisa Duggan defines it, is a

“politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption”



One of many intimate moments between David and Patrick.



The glorious spectacle of David and Patrick's wedding.

(cited in Kies 198).

For example, a famous TV example of homonormativity is Mitchell and Cameron in *Modern Family* (Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan, ABC, 2009-2020), who are not really depicted as being sexual or romantic with one another, and who represent a liberal fantasy of a gay couple who conform to a heterosexual way of life in a totally non-threatening way that enables heteronormative power structures to remain intact.[10] [[open endnotes in new page](#)]

In contrast, across its six seasons, *Schitt's Creek* challenges heteronormativity at every turn, especially through its portrayal of a community that supports and nurtures queer life. Where Mitchell and Cameron in *Modern Family* are desexualized, David and Patrick are openly affectionate and are shown kissing, holding hands, and cuddling in bed.[11] As Sa-ed Atshan argues in *The Advocate*, *Schitt's Creek* is a “deeply queer show” (2020). What makes it so queer is not only the liberating depiction of David and Patrick as two men in love. More profoundly, the show's queer political purchase lies in how their love is rooted in—and buoyed up by—a network of progressive and supportive interpersonal relationships.[12] In other words, what makes their queer love such a powerful example of queer futurity is how it is framed in relation to a vision of small-town utopia. In his account of what it means to watch *Schitt's Creek* as a queer spectator, Thomas J. West III writes that the show made him wish that his own small town where he grew up could also have been a “utopian safe space where homophobia dare not show its head.” However, as West notes, even more powerful than the show's potential for reframing the past is how it presents the radical possibility of a utopian queer future as an “ideal toward which every small town should aspire” (West 2020).

In her insightful essay on how *Schitt's Creek* “up-ends the status quo,” Katharine Schaab argues that *Schitt's Creek* queers “dominant power dynamics” through imagining “alternative forms of power, communication and collaboration” (2020, 149, 154). These alternative forms of power and connection are manifested in town business and politics but I would argue that they are also demonstrably articulated through the space of queer performance. Such performances include these:

- Jazzagals, the women's a cappella singing group led by Jocelyn, which Moira attempts to commandeer to great comedic effect,
- David and Moira doing their mother-son number for an “Asbestos Fest” fundraiser,
- Alexis's Paris Hilton/Lindsay Lohan/Britney Spear's inspired performance of “A Little Bit Alexis,”
- David's flamboyant rendition of Tina Turner's “Simply the Best,”
- Moira's comeback performance in *The Crows Have Eyes III: The Crowning*,
- Stevie's shining star turn as Sally in the town's production of Cabaret, and
- the spectacle of David and Patrick's wedding in the final episode.

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Jazzagals and the centrality of camp performance to *Schitt's Creek*.



David and Moira doing their mother-son number for "Asbestos Fest" in another example of camp performance on the show.



Alexis doing "A Little Bit Alexis" in a humorous performance watched by a gobsmacked Moira and Ronnie.



David's turn to serenade his beloved as a bemused Patrick notes: "You do know that people can see you, right?"



Moira Rose hamming it up as ornithologist and mutant crow, Dr. Clara Mandrake.



Stevie finding her voice in her *Cabaret* performance.

Many moments in *Schitt's Creek* thus use performance to queer public space and to rearrange and reorient ideas of "the familial and the social" (Ahmed 2006, 100). TV viewers are knowingly addressed as an active part of these performances. During David's lip sync performance of Tina Turner, for example, a bemused Patrick jokingly says, "you do know that people can see you, right?," referencing the large window behind him, but also, perhaps, giving a nod and a wink to the audience (Connolly 2020).

A notion of camp is central to *Schitt's Creek*, both in terms of the staged production numbers mentioned above and in relation to the exaggerated performances of the actors. Moira Rose, for example, the former-soap-opera star-turned-movie-star in a film franchise about killer crows, is a favourite among fans, and her characterization, replete with her signature one-of-a-kind accent and witty one-liners, exemplifies Susan Sontag's famous definition of camp as a "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (2009, 275). Through Catherine O'Hara's performance, Moira embodies the sharp humour and theatricality of *Schitt's Creek*. Campiness is not exclusive to Moira, however, and the heightened performances of all of the characters—including brother-sister duo David and Alexis who share a set of affectations and mannerisms—are central in transmitting the queer tone of the show.[13] While at least one reviewer has suggested that *Schitt's Creek* lacks tension and provides far too much



Maira Rose in one of her many haute couture outfits. The show's visual styling and fashion plays a central role in expressing its queer affective sensibilities.



Dressed to the nines from head to toe: Maira Rose as fashion icon.

“contentment” (Clarke 2020), I would argue that the show’s acerbic wit, which goes hand in hand with its moments of care and sincerity, prevents too sugary a tone and is where the tension of the show lies.

In his account of the politics of queer potentiality, Muñoz asserts that the “here and now is a prison house” and that “we must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*” (2009, 1). The hope that I see operating as a critical affective structure in *Schitt’s Creek* is something Muñoz prizes for how it can produce a “sense of astonishment,” which he views as an important demonstration of “utopian feeling” (ibid., 5). Such wonder offers a kind of “transport” or a “reprieve” from the darkness of lived realities, and can be found in a “campy fascination” with glamour and celebrity, but also in moments of queer relationality and of joy in the quotidian. In such instances, Muñoz suggests, it is possible to gain sight of a “restructured sociality” (2009, 7). Muñoz’s account of utopian feeling as offering a form of transport is remarkably in keeping with how many viewers spoke of the value in watching *Schitt’s Creek* as a kind of “tonic” during lockdown.

As with *Sex Education*, *Schitt’s Creek* renders its queer TV utopia through an affective atmosphere of joy and affirmation, with its mood aesthetic working to disseminate knowledge about queerness. In her discussion of queer TV, Parsemain discusses the role of emotion as a pedagogical tool for generating empathy with queer characters. Drawing from Bolton (2013), she discusses the notion of “queering the audience,” in which empathy is generated by “making viewers complicit in the queer experience” through identification (2019, 50). Both Bolton and Parsemain frame this idea of “queering the audience” in relation to tragedy (*Brokeback Mountain*) and “queer problems and experiences such as self-loathing, internalised and social homophobia” (*Glee*). *Schitt’s Creek* also queers its audience. What is noteworthy is how this is done through its generation of feelings of hope and possibility rather than identification with pain and suffering.



Fashion and costume design are fundamental to the queer moodscape of *Schitt’s Creek*. Inspired by the costume design of *Sex and the City*, Dan Levy has said that the high-end fashion of the Rose family, especially Maira Rose who wears white and black designer ensembles by Balenciaga, Givenchy, Céline, Comme des Garçons and Alexander McQueen, was a shorthand way to signify the former wealth of the characters (Picardi 2019). However, the costuming also performs more critical work: the show’s visual styling and fashion plays a central role in expressing its queer affective sensibilities, whether it is through David Rose’s “non-binary over-the-top high fashion luxury athleisure wardrobe” (Valen cited in Larocque 2020), Alexis Rose’s “modern bohemian vibe” (Matera 2020) or Maira Rose’s diva-esque collection of wigs, jewellery, six-inch heels and structural haute-couture outfits.



Maira Rose, resplendent in her signature nightwear of waistcoat and brooch.



David in one of his many distinctive jumpers. Clothing is important to establishing the queer moodscape of *Schitt’s Creek*.

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| Alexis's bohemian chic. | Moir Rose in one of her monochrome ensembles. |



Alexa, wearing a designer wedding dress, walks her brother down the aisle.



Moir's grand entrance at the wedding. She is wearing Alexander McQueen.

In the show's final ever episode, the hitherto unlucky in love David gets his "happy ending" in the form of marriage to his beloved Patrick. While the notion of a happy ending, particularly one that ends in wedded bliss, has typically been seen to uphold conservative ideals, *Schitt's Creek* manages to keep it queer. Indeed, the final episode of *Schitt's Creek*, which is called "Happy Ending," might be referred to as a "Happy Ending" in quotation marks because of how it knowingly circumvents a limiting homonormativity through its critical deployment of an irreverent queer tone and mood. So, a nervous David gets his "happy ending within a happy ending" as a hand job from the masseuse that Patrick thoughtfully hired to help him relax before the wedding. The joke is that the naïve and lovely Patrick left the masseuse money in an envelope with a note asking to make sure David was "extra" happy (which happened, just not in the way Patrick anticipated). The mood cues of the show are such that, similar to the gay porn rimming scene from *Sex Education*, the "happy ending" incident is not seedy or cheap but is at once the occasion for tender on and off-screen laughter, an expression of care and affection (David reassures and cuddles Patrick), and a demonstration of the bonds of friendship (David and Stevie share a cheeky smile and a wink).

At the wedding ceremony Alexa, adorned in a designer wedding dress, walks her brother David down the aisle, as the curtains part to reveal a spectacular Moir Rose, who is officiating, dressed in full Pope regalia, in an Alexander McQueen gown paired with Tom Ford knee high gold boots and gold metallic gloves, wearing a headpiece and what is arguably her most magnificent ever wig. An emotional Moir weds her son and his "butter-voiced beau," tears and mascara streaming down her face, even as she denounces sentimentality to Johnny and issues a classic Moir-ism—"there's a time and place for sentimentality and your only son's wedding day is hardly the moment." Cut to the next day, as the characters (and the actors) bid farewell, the final shot referencing a joke from the first season regarding the town's obscene welcome sign. As a farewell gift, the town's mayor, Roland Schitt, has refashioned the sign to show a dominant Moir behind a bent over Johnny, in a gendered reworking of the previous straight



Moira officiating at the wedding. Despite ending in marriage, *Schitt's Creek* manages to keep it queer and resists homonormativity.



The final image of the series, queering the town's motto.

tableau of a man “taking” a woman. The two adult Rose children, Alexis and David, wave in the background of the sign, the printed message of which —“Welcome to Schitt’s Creek, where everyone fits in”—has been well and truly queered by the show.

Schitt’s Creek thus demonstrates James MacDowell’s argument that happy endings are not necessarily always traditionalist or conformist (2013). Speaking of the dark, conservative political climate into which the final season of his show was released in 2020, Dan Levy has said that he noticed a shift in how people were receiving it: “it went from people saying it’s a funny show, to saying, ‘I *need* this show’” (qtd. in Telling 2020).[14] More than just a mood enhancer, though, *Schitt’s Creek* evokes its joyous mood and tone in the service of being critically queer.

Conclusion

Both *Sex Education* and *Schitt’s Creek* have attained worldwide recognition and success because of their streaming on Netflix, a global platform that prides itself on the “binge-ability” of its offerings. Both serialized shows are designed for the digitized streaming era, and their fresh take on sex positivity and their championing of LGBTQ+ politics and community coheres through networked media. If scheduled network TV has traditionally been organized around an idea of the heteronormative family unit cosily huddled around the TV as a physical object,[15] then Netflix’s emphasis on user-directed viewing—however illusory this vision of viewer control might be—has destabilized that model.

I have argued here that the political progressiveness of *Sex Education* and *Schitt’s Creek* is located not only in their representation of hitherto marginalized queer characters but, more significantly, in their affective tone and mood. Through their creation of a queer moodscape, both shows, I have suggested, transport their audiences to the “then and there,” offering what Muñoz eloquently describes in his queer manifesto as a “warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (2009, 1). A key part of the appeal of these queer shows during the coronavirus crisis resides in how they advance what the authors of *The Care Manifesto* (2020) describe as a “‘caring world’ and politics, in which care is both extensive and capacious, while transversing difference and distance” (2020, 21). The utopianism of both shows, and their privileging of an ethics of care and interdependency, activates feelings of hope and positivity. Accordingly, their queer pedagogical purchase is found in a politics of potentiality, not in “teachable moments rooted in struggle” (Feeney 2019), whereby gay characters are drafted in episodically in order to morally instruct and edify. Rather, the queerness is rooted in the televisual fabric of both shows and inheres across serialized episodes and seasons, as the notion of the heteronormative is fundamentally troubled and dislocated. If the new sex positivity is about keeping a queer and inquisitive open mind, resisting judgment, and unsettling binary understandings of sexuality, then *Sex Education* and *Schitt’s Creek* embody that ethos in their creation of alternative, better worlds that operate beyond the deadening constrictions of normativity in the here and now.

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Notes

1. See Stephanie Patrick (2018) and Victoria Kannen (2019) for a discussion of the Canadian sensibilities of *Schitt's Creek*. Patrick discusses how “even though the show does not present itself as specifically located in Canada,” there are “elements” that “allow it to be read, by Canadian audiences, as distinctly Canadian” (307). Kannen also argues that there are certain “identity markers that are used to make the place of Schitt's Creek meaningful to a Canadian audience, while also appealing to a broader global context by not making that Canadianness too obvious” (57). [[return to page 1](#)]

2. “Moordale” calls to mind *Riverdale*, another Netflix teen series, which presents a more dystopian and arguably less politically informed view of queer sexuality. *Riverdale* has been accused of “queerbaiting” its LGBTQ+ audience through the inclusion of sensationalized queer moments without fully developed gay characters (Prance 2018).

3. See Davis and Needham (2008, 7) on how gay and lesbian characters are often written out of shows after they come out.

4. See, for example, the British Board of Film Classification's 2019 public consultation and Classification Guidelines Report, which stresses public concern over TV in the streaming era. <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-classification/research>

5 The UK non-profit organization the School of Sexuality Education (formerly Sexplain) define sex positivity as “communicating without shame or embarrassment” or judgement. For more detail, see Whitehead (2019).

6. During the lockdown for Covid-19 in Spring 2020, I worked with the School of Sexuality Education to produce a “Teachable Moments” series in line with the new RSE. We produced several worksheets for secondary schools based around themes and episodes from *Sex Education* such as, for example, “Pleasure and Communication,” “Homophobia,” “Sexual Assault,” and “The Virginity Myth” (<https://sexplain.org.uk/teachable-moments>).

7. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VR2M9ZW0Gu4> [[return to page 2](#)]

8. See Mayer (2020) for a fuller account of how Furman's musical curation “brings a level of genderqueerness” to *Sex Education* and brings “people together in physical spaces and headspaces” (37).

9. For a further analysis of this sexual assault storyline please see Horeck (2020).

10. See Alexander Doty's *Flow* essay (2010) on “Modern Family, Glee and the Limits of Television Liberalism.” [[return to page 3](#)]

11. Indeed, while *Modern Family* was extraordinarily squeamish over the sexual nature of Mitchell's and Cameron's relationship, (with the two not even kissing

during the first season), *Schitt's Creek* proudly advertised its final season with a billboard of David and Patrick sharing a kiss.

12. See Schaab (2020) for a discussion of how *Schitt's Creek* challenges damaging interpersonal relationships and dynamics in order to imagine “alternative, yet plausible, economic and social futures” (150). Schaab’s reading also sees a “broken present and efforts to cultivate a more utopic future” as going “hand in hand” on *Schitt's Creek* (ibid.)

13. Fan investment and pleasure in these performances is extended and consolidated through the social media pages of *Schitt's Creek*, which have won “Best Social Media (for Film & TV)” and “People’s Voice” Webby Awards (awards given annually to the best websites or web-based media as judged by industry and tech experts). *Schitt's Creek* GIFs are particularly remarkable and worthy of further study. As Kate Miltner and Tim Highfield define it, a GIF is a ‘communicative device’ and a 30-year-old file format that enables the endless looping of image sequences: the animated Graphics Interchange Format’ (2017, 2). *Schitt's Creek* uses GIFs to produce further enjoyment for fans, and as a canny marketing tool. At the same time, however, these GIFs also foreground the show’s political messaging through links to GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) and other LGBTQ+ organizations. Its social media fandom intersects with real world queer politics in significant ways and is a visible demonstration of the socio-political impact of its queer utopia. Some of the series’ devoted LGBTQ+ followers have combined their fandom with queer advocacy and activism. For example, in August 2019 a group of LGBTQ+ fans raised over \$20,000 for a LGBT Youth Line, to “benefit queer youth in rural areas and indigenous communities across Ontario,” on the occasion of Dan Levy’s birthday (Linnell 2019b).

14. The utopian quality of the show became heightened during lockdown for Covid-19. On Twitter, fan praise for the show’s creation of a beautiful LGBTQ universe became linked to its function as escapism and a mood enhancer during lockdown.

15. See Gary Needham (2008) for a discussion of television scheduling, queer temporality, normativity and the family.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Aidan Pang (left) and Beck Banks (right) acted in the short film *The Coffee Name Game* in 2019.



The Rewire Film Fest, Eugene's first trans-specific film fest, inspired Beck Banks, Miche Dreiling, Liz Fairchild, and Aidan Pang to create the short film *The Coffee Name Game*.



The small crew for *The Coffee Name Game*

Queer and trans filmmaking: a new pedagogy

[Beck Banks](#) and [Miche Dreiling](#) in
interview with Joëlle Rouleau

Beck Banks

I'm a PhD candidate in Media Studies at the University of Oregon with a focus on transgender media. In particular, I look at rural trans media activists and the work that they're doing in the field, especially the region in which I grew up, Central Appalachia. I also research trans media representation and the limitations of representation. I've been making some short films and collaborating with the people whose activism I research as well as making shorts with Miche. This creating and collaboration seems to have gone hand in hand with my research as I'm becoming more of a maker.

Miche Dreiling

I am a PhD candidate in Media Studies at the University of Oregon, with a certificate in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. My research is in the area of non-binary gender. Specifically, I'm looking at driver's licenses and the X marker for non-binary that Oregon started using in 2017 (Oregon was the first state to allow people to designate themselves as non-binary on their license). I'm looking at folks' experiences with that new gender marker. I also make documentary films to go along with my research, so I'm a scholar and practitioner.

Joëlle Rouleau

All right, so let's jump into our conversation. What is creation like for you? What does it mean?

BB

This question is so big. I love it for that. Interestingly, the further I got into my PhD studies, the more I enjoyed cooking because I was able to do something with my hands. And I realized I could do so many more things with my hands other than just cook, especially since I was teaching production classes. Miche and I have been co-teaching a production class together for three summers now.

I think it was after that first summer co-teaching when we started talking about collaborating, and then the second one when we made work together. I like creating on my own, too, but large scale creation doesn't work that way. It takes more people. I am constantly sitting around thinking through project and film ideas, but there's a next step, and collaborating can create the momentum needed to take it. Collaboration makes people accountable to one another. It produces ideas and outcomes that are greater than the people involved. As it stands, higher ed does not usually promote a scholar-practitioner approach. We're often not trained in or encouraged to do it.

MD

consisted of Director/Makeup Specialist Liz Fairchild (left, featuring hand), Cinematographer/Editor Miche Dreiling (center), and Writer/Producer/Actor Beck Banks. Aidan Pang (not shown) acted in the piece.



At the premiere of *The Coffee Name Game*, Director Liz Fairchild (left) and Editor/Cinematographer Miche Dreiling (right) talked to the audience about the inspiration for and the process of making the short.



Beck Banks (left) and Aidan Pang (right) crack up while shooting a scene for *The Coffee Name Game*. The Washburne Café in downtown Springfield, OR, generously provided the space for filming.



While not planning to act in the short, Beck Banks found themselves taking on a role to

Even when we make things on our own, we're never really on our own. We stand on the shoulders of other creators and other scholars. Creation means collaboration for me too, which I think makes Beck and I a good team. The way that I usually approach creation is to allow myself space to tap into curiosity about things I observe in the world or encounter or read about. It's similar to the way that I formulate research ideas. Just start asking questions! With research, you read the literature, you figure out your theoretical approach and methods, but with filmmaking, it's just seeing what's out there in the world and doing it on a broader level than just from the academic ivory tower. When I'm in that scholar-practitioner mode, I balance these processes and they inform one another. But in some of the more creative projects that Beck and I have worked on together, I get to just be a practitioner, which means making stuff and telling cool stories with awesome people.

JR

To me, any research project is creative because you are following leads and curiosity and instinct. And you are driven by an energy for "finding something." Creation allows for stories or ideas that are not necessarily valued in research to be explored. And I guess that's one of the reasons why I do research-creation. It's my own way to queer research and to have the attitude, "Up yours, I'm going to do something else."

BB

I love that! That's amazing. Telling stories that haven't been told is something Miche and I are really invested in. Of course, you can sit down and research representation or its limitations for a long time. But if you don't ask, "Hey, what can I do to fix that?" that's a problem. My creation often tries to present a solution to what I've been researching. Research leads to more creativity, too. I wrote a short story a couple of years ago, just on a whim; when I first started working on it, I started researching. So I start with, "I have this vague idea," and then it continues to develop. You're throwing more ideas into yourself and therefore more come out. Just a matter of editing from there.

JR

You've mentioned it twice now, so let's go there: What are the limits / limitations to representations?

BB

I think I am using that concept because I have an article coming out about trans masculine visibility on the screen—which is not really there or wasn't for there a long time. Since there has been more representation in mainstream media of trans people, violence has increased towards trans women of color. So investigating that representation starts getting into a tricky and dire area. For example, how can representation be done well and with respect? Do we understand what's happening with certain representations and the consequences? Trans people may be seen as more of a threat because of more representation. Yet representation, as Laverne Cox noted, doesn't fix problems as much as it may set us on the path to telling stories that can create more empathy, bring progress. That means that we really need to be having people with a trans perspective telling those stories because too often we've seen how people get objectified, used as furniture for telling stories. It's unethical.

JR

That is a very interesting and important point to make. Representation was discussed in the 90s as something that you wanted at all cost—whether bad or good, we don't really care as long as we talk about our lives—because that was our main challenge. One of the limitations that you've mentioned is very important, but I also think we must consider another fact: there's no such thing as

ensure the production starred and was produced by queer and trans people.



Aidan Pang made his acting debut in the short. The cast and crew are all doctoral candidates in programs at the University of Oregon – Pang in the Department of English, Liz Fairchild in the Department of Theatre Arts, and Beck Banks and Miche Dreiling in the School of Journalism and Communication.



The short film *The Coffee Name Game* continues to make rounds on the film festival circuit. In the fall of 2020, it showed on the first night of the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival.

good or bad representations. They are just exposing some social condition and moving all the time, and their reception depends on which circle you are in. If you've never seen a representation of a trans person, this can be your "Hallelujah moment," you know, it might actually save your life; but also that same representation can also be dooming your possibility, your life possibility. It's complicated territory.

BB

Let me go back for a moment. The day that Caitlyn Jenner *Vogue* cover appeared, I had about 40 people stop by my desk at my workplace and tell me that they stand with me in solidarity. I wasn't out, or at least I thought I wasn't, gender-wise. I didn't fully understand myself, and my utter lack of closets. So it helped me along those lines, to understand myself through other people.

But later that day, I had a cop follow me for several blocks in a really menacing way. I walked into a store and had to run out like the side door just because I felt a threat. That day was a microcosm of the ripple effects of representation. The best thing representation can do is give people insight into themselves, and that might provide them with knowledge to be able to reach out and form a supportive community, feel agency in their lives. If that happens through these creations that we are talking about, if they are queer/trans based, that's just one more way to help form that community.

MD

Yeah, I think that representation for representation's sake is something to be mindful about because it follows a film industry, Hollywood, that's based on toxic heteronormativity. If these stories aren't informed by people who have the experiences and perspective behind the stories that are being told, then that lack is what will be reproduced. And that leaves out women, people of color, queer, trans people, disabled people and all the intersections of these plus class. Or it will lead to further misunderstanding about what these things mean and then that's another barrier for folks to overcome, both in terms of shaping their own identity and in understanding their community. Stories told in one-dimensional ways can be harmful.

JR

That leads into my second question. How can we have multi-dimensional representations or creation? And I'm guessing one of the ways is through queer and trans perspectives. But what does that mean to you?

BB

I think it's more than about labor or representation, I think it's about audience. Often queer, trans material appears in media made for cis, straight people, and we all feel and see that, time and time again. It's the bulk of the stuff that you see in the mainstream. If I ask, "Does really strong trans, queer work make it to the mainstream much?" the answer is no.

MD

I've long meditated on what a trans or queer gaze is to me as I thought about it in an academic but not experiential way. So as a filmmaker what I try to do in terms of a queer gaze is turn the gaze backward and inward at viewers. It requires them to be aware of the medium itself, and then also feel some sort of empathy and look inward—that's at the heart of what trans and queer filmmaking means to me. In my work, this tends to manifest itself as humor, which I didn't actually realize until I went back to think about this question. For instance, in Beck's and my film *The Coffee Name Game*, there was an outtake, a scene in which Beck is saying names over and over in a little montage. You (Beck) said "Marco" as one of the names and we all yelled "Polo!" It was a funny moment on set and encapsulated all the fun we were having making this film about trans self-discovery. And so I



In the fall of 2020, Miche Dreiling films training videos for the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation at the University of Oregon, necessitated by COVID-19.



Beck Banks and Miche Dreiling have fostered a relationship with the University of Oregon's Summer Academy to Inspire Learning, a program for Oregon high school students. Pictured are students from the summer of 2019 learning how to produce a live, interview-style television program.

put that scene after the credits in the final cut because I think it's important for people who are watching the media to recognize that this work was made by real people with unique perspectives.

JR

Going back to Laura Mulvey—as viewers we are trying to forget that we are in a film, basically. That's the idea, right? It's the idea that we forget we're in the film so that we go with it and we follow it and we engage with it. But if we look back at the New Queer Cinema in the beginning of the 90s, the whole idea was to actually break that spell, break that connection that we had with the film as an audience. And I totally agree with that idea, especially now since we are always mediated through images. Specifically, within the pandemic because everything's on Zoom and with our phones, our social media, Instagram, Twitter. It's always a mediation of some sort. I know that's not true for everybody, but we have a common culture of self-mediation through social media. And we forget this media is an action, it is a performance. We are putting ourselves in the real world through a mode of representation. And you raise a very interesting question too: How to queer that? And humor ... humor is dangerous.

MD

I think another function of humor is that it serves is to lift the veil a little bit and let people lower their guards. And it also lowers the bar for queer folks out there to see that real people are doing this media making; real people are making things and having fun doing it. It took me until my mid-20s to realize that I could tell stories this way. That no one was standing at some gate or was going to stop me from making films—I could do this. Because of that, I want that bar lowered so that every person who has a story can tell it or feel like that's an option available to them.

JR

Make it more accessible.

MD

Yeah.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



COVID-19 has vastly changed the filmmaking landscape. Here, Miche Dreiling records a meeting as b-roll. Their dissertation filmmaking and research is conducted via Zoom.



Miche Dreiling screens their films in both popular and academic venues in order to reach a wide audience and highlight their work which seeks to make films which are well-grounded and research that is accessible. Dreiling presents their micro-film *Woke* at the 2018 Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender conference in South Lake Tahoe. *Woke* is an 18-second film, inspired by the GIPHY Film Festival.

JR

Let's talk about your latest film. What were the biggest challenges that you faced as queer and trans filmmakers?

BB

You know, I ended up doing fieldwork with a group of trans people who were making a documentary in central Appalachia on trans health care. And I would say one of the biggest problems we had was money. I was along for the ride and then all the sudden I was a part of it. Because I can't divorce those things in my life. God, there's so much that you do within your life as a trans or queer person to divorce yourself from the world around you. All of a sudden I'm setting up the equipment and then I'm doing the interviews. It just happened very naturally, and we're still in touch and talking about "Well, what if we get some more funding." It would be fantastic. That's why I brought the project to Miche so we would try to co-produce and rework some of that film for release. I think everybody can say their project needs funding.

Another obstacle would be Covid. It really derailed a lot of plans right now. I can't justify getting on a plane. I can't justify interviewing people about health care during this period. That's just not going to happen.

And I understand a lot of people need to protect themselves. For that particular documentary, we put out a lot of calls for participants and I started noticing that most of the people who volunteered to be interviewed were white. That really limits the stories that we are able to tell, but I also understand why so many of those who stepped up are white. Rural trans people are facing a lot but there is another layer of issues for trans people of color in that area if they are visible or allow for the documentation of their lives. Telling stories of all the people is difficult for us because of access but also because of the need to make sure that people are safe. It is a risk to have a documentary about a trans person in a rural area at all. That could apply to urban areas as well...but it is different.

JR

There's transphobia, racism and homophobia everywhere, but I understand what you mean. Also, I guess in urban settings we have a feeling that we're close to other people, we are close to services, whereas in rural environments, it feels remote. It feels far away, feels like there's nobody out there.

BB

And when I met that documentary crew—they live in a rural area—I realized I was one of the few new people they would be meeting that year. I understood how special that is as a trans person, too. So traveling together for 15 days for the doc, even though it was on a very serious subject, I felt a sense of joy that I really hope that everybody who is trans gets to experience. Just being with a group of people who share a similar identity, even though they may have wildly different politics and viewpoints, has something incredibly comforting about it. It's transformative and ... I think that film making and other creative collaborations are one more way to be in community.

JR

On a more personal level, are you from a rural background?

BB



Miche Dreiling takes any excuse to capture drone footage. They are pictured here taking a test flight in Woodburn, OR on a friend's documentary film shoot.



Miche Dreiling captures drone footage in Woodburn, OR. In order to fly a drone professionally in the United States, a person must obtain an FAA Small Unmanned Aerial Systems, or part 107, license.

Actually both of us are from rural backgrounds ... I'm from East Tennessee, a small town, so I am originally from Appalachia.

MD

I grew up on a farm in rural Kansas so I'm really cognizant of the ways that people get out of those sorts of lives; I think for me, knowledge and creativity were the ways out. I definitely feel that sense of rural isolation that you are talking about.

BB

I think that isolation makes representation and its surrounding issues all the more important for me. It made the screen a lifeline. I imagine you all may have had the same experience if you're doing this kind of work; you start to understand how valuable media representation is when you are young. For example, when the *Celluloid Closet* came out, which is dating myself a little, I may have watched it 20 times within a couple of weeks. (laughs)

MD

Those queer readings come early! I think innately when we see stories that are similar in some way to the way that we feel, we gravitate toward that.

JR

Talking about representations being a lifeline: we're hungry for them. We need them. But paradoxically they are limiting, dangerous. It's a very tricky to find a balance within representation. How do you, from a filmmaking perspective, engage with that difficult question? You said, earlier Miche, you are trying to include showing the film being made but is that the only technique? Are there any other ways to do this?

MD

It isn't necessarily a technique but more of an approach. I think media that unapologetically allows queer and trans folks to just be is important. They should not have to be 'the trans person' or 'the queer person' in the story and that be their whole identity. I am also a parent and the media that my son consumes is markedly different from what we're used to. What I'm seeing is that there's media available to him that shows non-binary gender examples in a way that was never possible when I was his age. I think that the most successful stories allow people to be just themselves first, and then tell stories of them as holistic characters operating in situations.

JR

As a parent, as an audience member and as a filmmaker, how would you describe differences between media? Because this special issue focuses on queer television, but it actually opens up to queer media because, what is television nowadays? It's a very interesting broad conversation, but would you say there's a difference between queer television and film? You said there's a difference between what your son watches and what you had access to at his age. Is it the same for everything?

MD

That's a really good question. I think that the distinction is becoming more blurred. I mean, I think there's a class distinction at work between film and TV. Television has historically been the "every person's" media and film is something that is associated with high cinema, high art. It's elevated as, you know, highbrow



Miche Dreiling finds that making documentary films, activism, and research are intimately intertwined.



In the fall of 2019, Beck Banks worked with the group Transilient on the docu-series *Climbing Every Mountain*. Nonbinary Artist Aurora Gantz walks through an Asheville, NC, park in the opening credits



Mo Bell, Beck Banks, Jayce Jefferson, and

—in the same way that literature and journalism are distinct from one another. And that distinction is becoming lessened by streaming media. As an example, I actually am not sure that my son really sees a difference between movies and TV. For him, TV is like a bite-size pieces of a longer story. For documentary storytelling, which is what I do most of the time, there's a sweet spot in there where we have these docu-series that are an hour each and you've got seven of them that tell a bigger story through many small lenses. We need to question some of these format distinctions in the current moment, especially those rooted in class.

JR

Let's go on about that. I think that the key difference that existed between film and TV before still exists, but now between “complex TV” like *Game of Thrones* and more soapy TV, perhaps like *This Is Us*. There is a world of differences between those two types of television shows and they are class-related and they are related to funding. Would that distinction affect your practice? Is that change in media and film taken into account when you're filming?

BB

Mostly I consider streaming when I think TV, movies. It's all falling together especially for younger generations, but nobody ever talks about “independent” television. I guess that makes me a film person with my media making and more of a researcher interested television. TV is so rich as I watch to see what happens when people go back to it time and time again, what compels them, the giant story arcs that happen on TV.

MD

I think media makers' approach changes in a really practical way. How long do I have to tell the story? How long do I have to grab people's attention to get them invested, and then tell a story that's going to shift their perspective in some way? I have a communication background and see projects as an opportunity to persuade in a certain way, right? All communication aims at persuading us in some way or another. And so, I think when you're talking about this distinction in format between television and film, as a creator I sort of see a benefit in having 10 hours to tell a story, ten hours to sit with my audience and really give rich details and examples. Over that space of time, I could let folks tell their story in a way that could connect with the audience rather than try to tell a big story in an hour or two hours, which is usually the big challenge of filmmaking.

JR

This brings us back to the limits of representation: having time makes it possible to communicate more complex trans identity, trans realities. It makes you go beyond “passing or not” and viewers' basic problematic curiosity. This is the classic first stop of trans representation. I have a feeling that having time might lead to more complex storytelling. But Beck, you still go for film. So, in your practice what can film offer?

BB

I want to make something that could stand on its own instead of having to go through the massive process that it takes to do things for television. But that process might be breaking down as well. For example, on the Amazon channel, when they show an episode or two or YouTube series. We might be getting into seeing strong, independent television as a byproduct of streaming. We're even seeing changes in formats as U.S. television replicates the format of British mini-series—using film length in the TV format. So there seems to be a crumbling of

James Heatherly (left to right) pause from interviews to take a group picture during the first-run of filming of the docu-series *Climbing Every Mountain*. Banks joined this crew for fieldwork in the fall of 2019.



The docu-series *Climbing Every Mountain* received some of its funding from PFLAG National. Miche Dreiling and Beck Banks are currently working to raise more funding for additional filming to continue and refine the project.



Roanoke College Assistant Professor of Public History Samantha Rosenthal spoke with the *Climbing Every Mountain* crew about cofounding the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, and the work achieved through it. She also spoke about understanding her gender in Roanoke, VA, instead of where she relocated from: New York.

barriers. Similarly, HBO has 20-minute documentaries. So maybe I can't say I'm solidly creating films. But for now, that's my instrument. Might be due to self-imposed limitations...

MD

I think Beck, you and I are on the same page more than it may appear.

BB

No, I think we should fight. (laughs)

MD

I have spent a lot of time thinking about availability of resources when it comes to media creation because the documentary is part of my dissertation. And so, I'm interviewing folks in Oregon, where I'm living. These were going to be in-person interviews, but now they're going to be conducted over Zoom. In practical terms, that means that the individuals have full autonomy over the framing of their shots, the equipment that they use, the way that they sort of represent themselves and how they create themselves and frame themselves in this film. I'm taking that as a really innovative, great thing. It may have come about due to Covid but I support handing over autonomy—sharing the privilege we have to make films and tell stories this way, and making that accessible to others. I'm really excited to talk with people about the way that they tell their stories through visual media. They have this rectangle and they can basically do whatever they want with it

Basically, as a filmmaker, I like handing over that power of framing to the people whose stories I want to get out into the world. Because I don't like feeling like I have too much power as researcher/filmmaker. I understand the power inherent in those relationships and the nuances around that, but I like facilitating folks telling their own stories in the way that they want to both visually and verbally.

JR

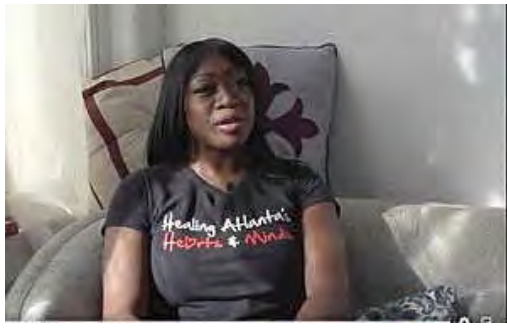
Thanks for that, it really makes sense with our goal of queering film practice. Would you have anything to add as a takeaway about queer and trans research and film practice?

BB

I'm glad that I got so much into production. I think that that was a gift that I got through the School of Journalism and Communication at University of Oregon through our Gateway to the Media class with Lisa Heyamoto, Lori Shontz, and Dan Morrison and by supporting Creative Strategies classes with Deb Morrison. In fact, I was teaching production before I started in a doctoral program, and I had some background in creating, too. But now, teaching labs where I am coaching people or critiquing productions has leveled me up. And, then I matched up with Miche, which is fantastic.

I wish that everybody got the opportunity to teach production-oriented courses, especially graduate students in media and communication studies or other social science and humanities programs. It's satisfying and just mentally comforting. I am able to move my work outside the academy by making something and actually use what I have been studying for so long. I will take it with me through my career so there's no way that I'll stop being a creator now.

Going back to our conversation earlier, it seems that there's a trope that queer people are only queer— all they are is queer. For example, I wrote an article, collaborating with a trans activist about a queer organization. We were invited by a journal to do this piece. After we turned it over to the journal, the feedback that we got from one reviewer was, "You didn't mention anything about being queer." Everything we were writing about was inherently queer. We didn't discuss being queer/trans and what that meant. Having to always spell it out is an odd thing, an



Mental Health Clinician Karen Hargrove talked about the scarcity for trans-specific mental health for the *Climbing Every Mountain* docu-series. The series focused on stories about trans mental and physical healthcare throughout Appalachia and used Atlanta as a point of comparison.



The Transilient crew stopped to explore and capture b-roll in the Smokey Mountains.



Jesse flips through records to pick music to play after being interviewed for *Climbing Every Mountain*. As a 42-year-old trans man, he recounted his experience with mental and physical healthcare as well as his very full life in the Virginia countryside.

objectification of sorts, a move toward totalizing. I think that social problem is one we see reflected in our media. These things play together, off of each other.

JR

It's true. And I think it's a limitation also to label something as queer or trans or to always have to go through this. It's another complicated relation because everything I do as a researcher is fueled by my experience. My experience is as a queer person. The separation between my public life and my personal life is quite blurred, but it isn't anyone else's business other than mine to decide where that border is, and in fact that border can move. Sometimes my professional life can be much more personal, like today for example when I've contacted you specifically to discuss queer and trans filmmaking. It's a personal choice, but it's also weird to have to push it on every front at all times. And it's frustrating sometimes too—that blurred line between personal and political.

MD

I think that, as a goal, I like to break down those distinctions because they don't seem to apply equally to folks who occupy that invisible norm, right? Straight people never have to talk about their experience as a straight filmmaker and white people never have to talk about their experience as a white filmmaker. I think that the distinctions between our personal and our private lives should be self-directed, but also they are maybe not as important as they're made out to be by folks who never have to talk about their personal lives.

Our personal life factors so much into the way that we approach our research as well as the way that we approach our creative practice that separating the two just seems unnatural to me. And it represents yet another barrier for folks who can't separate or have a more difficult time separating their personal and private lives because of their personality, because of the way that they present to the world, because of a million other factors. I think that for me, a queer person who came from a rural background, the academy was my way out of that. College represented knowledge and it was a funnel for my creativity too, but then I had the experience of realizing that the academy was this exclusionary institution. So I sort of leaned back on my personal drive toward creativity. It has shown me that some of these distinctions themselves are driving some of the inequity that we see in institutions.

Personally, I would like to hear what drives people, I want to hear that personal side of things. That's what makes life interesting, right? Nobody wants to watch a movie about a person completely conforming to societal norms and not living their truth; nobody wants to watch a movie about that, it would be terrible. Basically, I think that the best stories come from folks who have interesting and different and queer things happen to them and are themselves interesting and different and queer and exist in the world. It's about more than representation; it's about telling stories that resonate with people.

JR

Your intervention makes me think about something and I'm testing, okay, the question might not work. Let's just give it a try. I'm assuming that you both read *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1991). Well, you know how Butler starts the book by questioning, "What is the subject of feminism?" She says that feminism's having to do with being a woman basically adds to the materialization of the oppression of the class of women and of gender norms. What if we try to do the same thing with queer and ask, "What would be the subject of queer?"

MD

Queer to me epitomizes weirdness. It's a way of being that's different from the



Mo Bell, Beck Banks, and James Heatherly snap pictures of an alley mural while stopping in Knoxville for more interviews.

societal norms we're often held to, and so it's not limited to people who identify as a queer person. But I do think that queer people are well positioned to tell queer stories because we have become aware of and identified our weirdness and the specific ways that we're different from the norm. We are the weirdos, so we're best suited to tell weird and interesting and queer stories.



[Right] Producer Jayce Jefferson (left) and Director James Heatherly (right) celebrate wrapping up a 15-day documentary tour of Appalachia and Atlanta. Filming took the crew to West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia.

[Above] The Transilient crew interviewed people at the Virginia Harm Reduction Center about trans healthcare and Appalachian healthcare, working to bridge the knowledge between the two areas.



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The Werk Room entrance has become an iconic narrative staple of each premiere episode of a *RuPaul's Drag Race* season. In this image, Nicole Paige Brooks (from Atlanta, Georgia) enters the Werk Room in *Drag Race* season two. This is the 'first' Werk Room entrance through a visual doorway, as in season one contestants just appeared in a backstage environment.

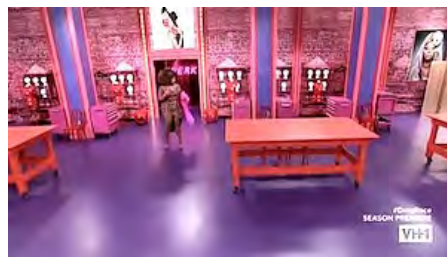


Katya Zamolodchikova enters the Werk Room in *Drag Race* season seven. By the middle of the show's run, the Werk Room door became a more eye-catching archway, with the queens expected to enter with a pose and something witty to say to the camera, as opposed to the casual entrances of the first few seasons.

Pre-making drag: *RuPaul's Drag Race* spoiler fandom and queer temporal imagination

by [Sean Donovan](#)

2019's iteration of the annual casting call for new drag queens eager to become "America's Next Drag Superstar" on *RuPaul's Drag Race* was announced on Monday December 2nd (Duffy 2019), with channel VH1 later confirming it will indeed air the competition's thirteenth season at an unspecified date (Alter 2020). On Wednesday, December 9th 2020, almost a year later, season thirteen's crop of new queens eager to compete for prestige, money, and viral meme opportunities were officially announced (Vary 2020). The queens numbered at thirteen, perfectly matching the age of *RuPaul's Drag Race* on the air, at this point a bonafide reality television institution. Starting on a weekly basis on January 1st, 2021, the thirteenth season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* will *happen*, as an indisputable fact of archived television history. But beyond the space of production, in the nebulous time between the confirmation of a new season casting search and the official cast announcement (which can take as long as a year) a version of *RuPaul's Drag Race* season thirteen *already happened*, and happened in an ephemeral form, gradually and painstakingly taking shape as the result of fragmentary gossip and detective work in the forums of the social media platform Reddit.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

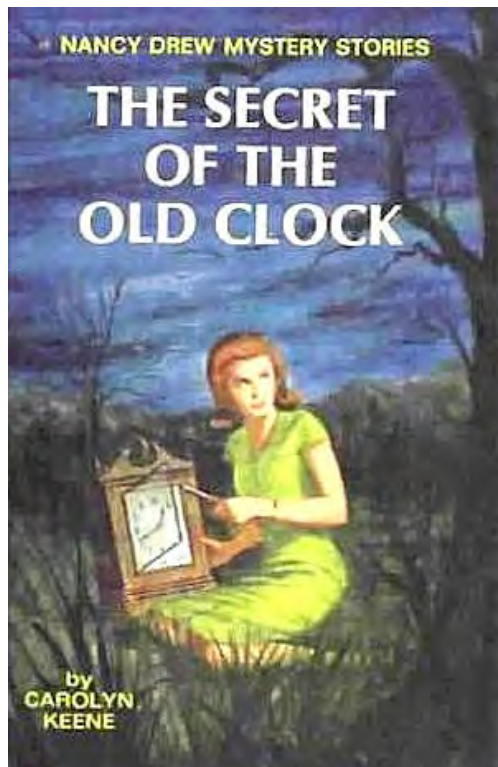


Brita enters the Werk Room in *Drag Race* season twelve. Minute variations are made to the Werk Room aesthetics every few seasons, while retaining the core concept of a design space for the queens to work and be remade in Ru's image.



Since season 7 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the 'behind the scenes' companion series *Untucked*, where the queens talk and stir drama with one another during judges' deliberations, has taken place in a sound stage with little artificial set dressing. Prior to this the queens conversed in elegant lounges, often tied to specific product placement sponsors. Perhaps the producers are attempting to satisfy a growing fan desire to see beyond the flashy exterior of sequins and sparkle to something more 'real.'

In *RuPaul's Drag Race* tradition, new drag queen competitors announce



Carolyn Keene's young female detective character Nancy Drew, gracing the cover of her first literary mystery *The Secret of the Old Clock* (1930). 'Nancy Drew' has become a term for the boldly investigative spoiler fans of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The slang is part of the performatively femme claiming of women's names in queer male circles, with an extra association of kitsch in the significantly antiquated age of the Nancy Drew novels.

themselves with a catchphrase and a pose after arriving through a large pink doorway into the Werk Room. But on Reddit, the queens have already “arrived,” their fates minutely analyzed for months, their actual entrance and introduction amounting to nothing more than a symbolic confirmation of something already known. Online, the Werk Room entrance is recognized for what it is: an elaborate television narrative motif, which commands the curiosity of the spoiler fans less than the black industrial sound stage that surrounds an illusion of pink manufacturing. Reddit has emerged as the central meeting place of *Drag Race*'s passionate and motivated fandom. Here fan discussion, theories, viewing parties, and most intriguingly, spoilers of the television show to come, grow rapidly and define a key extension of *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s textuality.

A reality competition show might be a surprising place to find a prodigious culture around spoiling.[2] A show so demonstrably devoted to the joys of frivolity seems like an odd text for its fandom to attempt to outrun, unlock, and guess in advance. After all, *Drag Race*, like drag culture itself, covets the surprise, style, and panache of a well-timed reveal. But rather than ruining drag's reveal, the proliferation of spoiler fans within the show's online fan ecosystem showcases an additional way of relating to artifice and performance. The spoiler fans of *Drag Race* on Reddit (often called “Nancy Drews” in reference to the young female detective of literary fame) devote themselves to decoding and demystifying the happenings of *RuPaul's Drag Race* before they are televised for the world to see. The material trace of drag fans' obsession is evident here not in sparkle, glitter, and rhinestones, but in a networked consolidation of spreadsheets, social media links, charts, gossip, poor-quality photography from *Drag Race* sets, and other ephemera that is dissected and debated to create behind-the-scenes production narratives. Spoiler hunting is especially active before a season of *Drag Race* airs, a desire to be with the show as it unfolds in production time, rather than in its final polished form.

As of this writing in fall 2020, the spoiler hunting for season 13 is totally abuzz with activity. A wide group of Reddit users have almost unlocked an overall cast list made up of suspected queens who have taken prolonged social media breaks, spent lots of money on new outfits, or who seem otherwise prime *Drag Race* competitors. On the main thread for season 13 detective work, user warriorholmes comments on the supposed cast list:

“Excited for them all. Their lives are going to dramatically change next year once the Meet The Queens[3] are released. Then they'll start getting verified, thousands of follows/likes/comments, getting bombarded with attention. How cool <3.”

User asby responds to their comment with a slightly foreboding continuation: “And some will get bombarded with hate,” a reference to the notoriously toxic behavior often exhibited by *Drag Race* fans towards contestants deemed unlikable, often queens of BIPOC identities (u/NotRuPaul 2020).[4]

The work of spoiling a queen's participation in *Drag Race* ahead of time comes loaded with the knowledge, for the fans, that being cast in *Drag Race* constitutes a



Season ten contestant Asia O'Hara wore somber black looks like this to various *Drag Race* promotional events around the finale of season ten, in an act widely interpreted as a commentary on anti-black racism in the fandom. The dark visual, suggesting ash and charred material, resonated with a recent threat from an online fan to burn her alive. O'Hara was public about this racist attack and received support from the drag community (Daw 2018).

fundamental televisual transformation, creating a sharp distinction between a drag queen's past and her future. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is often described as a vehicle out to transform its contestants, capturing them in narrative arcs borne out of editing and story construction that emphasize progress, overcoming obstacles, and personal/professional development that they would never have reached had they not participated in the *Race* (Lovelock 2019, Yudelman 2017). With the dramatic arrival of a drag queen stepping through the threshold of a fake pink doorway, she finally "arrives" as a reality show star. These simple footsteps encode a progress narrative of queens having "made it," out of drag bar obscurity, into the spotlight of national fame. This movement echoes the transformations *RuPaul's Drag Race* has enabled as a whole. The show embodies queer culture and artistry that has successfully left the working-class underground and emerged popular and "for everyone," on a major channel with corporate sponsorship, online notoriety, memes, and retweets. With these gains comes the threat of intimidating dangers, both in terms of hostility from normative "fans" and an increasing dilution of queer artistic practices.

Drag Race spoiler fandom centers directly on this animating tension of queerness on television by searching for the queen before she has access to a star-making medium. Fans may only know about these performers through their connections to a popular television brand, yet this spoiling endeavors to short-circuit this form of mediation, both embracing drag outside an increasingly proprietary context, and valuing a more modest drag done without the sheen of a television budget or the competitively ever-rising personal financial expense of *Drag Race* contestants. Spoilers here are a radical disruption of temporal order as it relates to media distribution. Elizabeth Freeman (2010) sees drag itself as already temporally marked—forming a connection between "queer performativity...[and] disavowed political histories" (65) both rooted in the "regression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present." For this reason, *drag* may be interpreted literally as its other definition of stalled movement (62). If *Drag Race* has the powerful impact of creating "pre-*Drag Race*" and "post-*Drag Race*" signposts in the lives of its participants (and indeed, the art form of drag overall), spoiler fandom in this form of "meeting the queens" before they can be proprietarily "met" in exchange for VH1 advertising revenue, aims to relish in and extend the world of "pre-*Drag Race*" in a fleeting zone of ephemeral connection, mediated online.



This image of Vanessa Vanjie Mateo, A'Keria Chanel Davenport, and Silky Nutmeg Ganache leaked to the spoiler reddit during the filming of season eleven. It is stamped with a watermark by JakeyonceTV, a notable *Drag Race* social



Laganja Estranja's entrance through the Werk Room archway in season six, featured in all the trailers, and her introductory exclamation "Come on season six! Let's get sickening!" was immediately iconic and set a kind of informal template

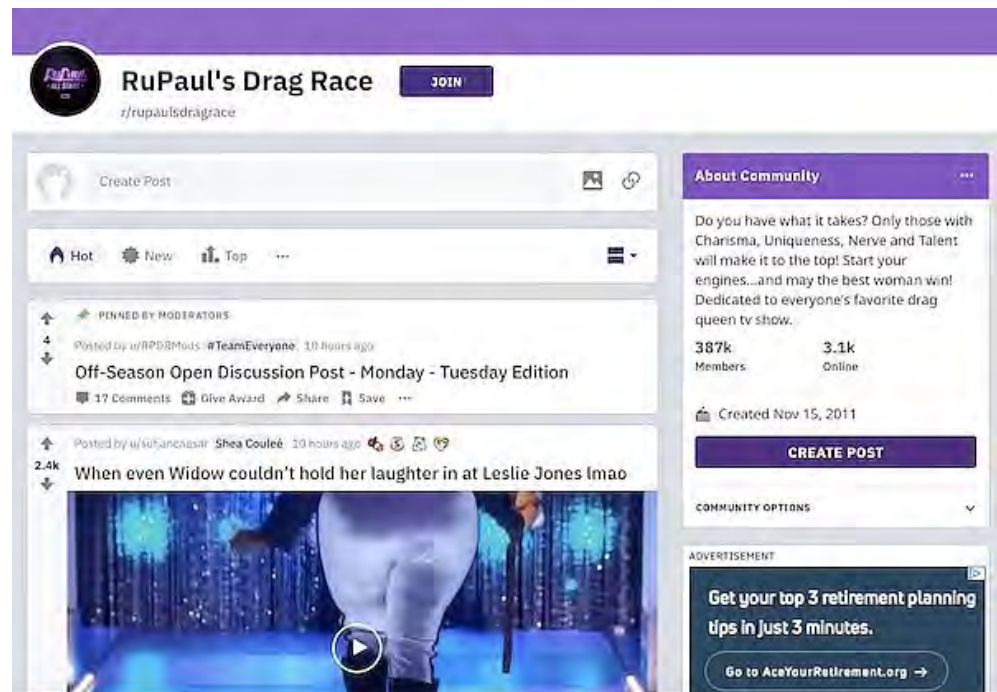
media personality who hosts a YouTube recap series. This proprietary instinct to imprint images with the spoiler fan's name who helped bring them to light evidences the competitive system of clout in the *Drag Race* spoiler fandom, with many fans eager to present themselves as the most informed and quickest Nancy Drew.

for subsequent Werk Room entrances. Many queens in the following seasons sought to deploy catchphrases and make viral moments of their introductions on *Drag Race*.

RuPaul's Drag Race spoiler fans create a more and more rarefied position of informed spoiler knowledge that has intensified since the show's beginning. The Nancy Drews' spoiler investigations attempt to turn back the clock on the Werk Room entrance to find the queen waiting in the wings, fabulous and fascinating in her own right before *Drag Race* has announced her as "a star." Implicit in this investigation is the ardent ambivalence of LGBTQ media consumers in the 21st century: enjoying newfound prominence and visibility on U.S. television screens, while questioning what has been lost and what the march of homonormative time has erased. The political implications therein are numerous, and include defending the working-class roots of drag artistry against the elite class of corporate entertainment capitalism that has hijacked and escalated its proprietary dimensions. Fans' laborious quest for "the authentic queen" before the contamination of reality television, whether or not such a queen exists, displays a desire for socio-temporal reversibility, a "pre-making" of LGBTQ media culture forged with utopian potential. Online spoiler-fan social publics create this time machine, pre-making a television show that provides them communion with what queer culture *was*, or *might have been*, in close cohabitation with what queer culture *is* within a compromised media-scape.

Reddit's *Drag Race* archives

In this study I locate the *RuPaul's Drag Race* spoiler fandom principally within the culture of Reddit, both r/rupaulsdragrace and its spin-off exclusively devoted to spoiler discussion, r/SpoiledDragRace.

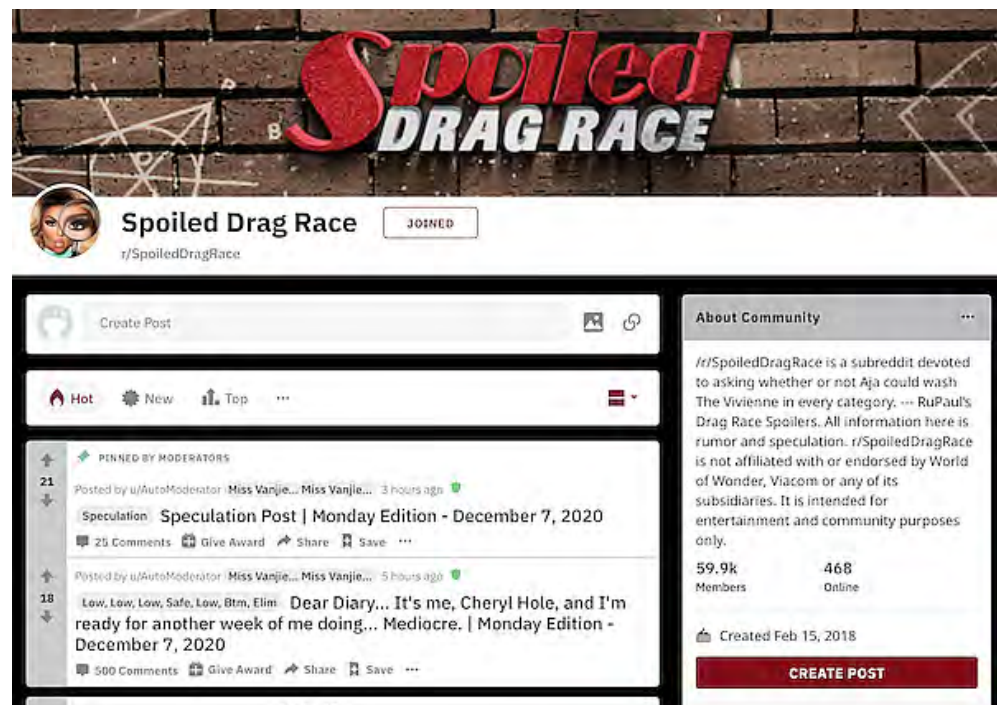


The home screen of r/rupaulsdragrace (screenshot taken 12/7/20).

RuPaul's Drag Race on Reddit occupies a complicated ecosystem of interlocking subreddits. Various communities besides the two under investigation here thrive

with constant traffic, including a subreddit devoted to scandal and inter-personal drama within the *Drag Race* community, as well as various groups devoted to different meta-discourses on Reddit fan activity. In 2018, *Drag Race* was declared the most popular television show on Reddit, edging out the previous holder of that title, HBO's mega-hit *Game of Thrones* (Nolfi 2018). As of this writing, the main *Drag Race* Reddit has 387,161 subscribers, while r/SpoiledDragRace has 59,871, though users are not required to “subscribe” in order to read and comment, meaning the traffic and readership is realistically much larger. The majority of my research was conducted through a discursive and textual analysis of r/SpoiledDragRace during the lead-up to both the fourth season of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* (premiering on December 14, 2018) and the eleventh season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* proper (premiering on February 28, 2019).

Throughout this time, I was a quiet user on the site, participating on occasion but primarily spectating as spoiler information was compiled, debated, disseminated, and organized. My familiarity with the structure and rituals of *Drag Race* spoiler fan cultures came from before this time period, and my awareness of the fervent activity around the show inspired this project. I singled out threads for particularly devoted attention that related to “spoiled” casting information and speculation on the queens ahead of seasons’ airdates. Over this time, active users demonstrated patterns of passionate archiving and creation. I myself am the ambivalent fan characterized in this study, in a push/pull relation with a complicated television program. My own positionality within that framework lends me added insight into the textual dynamics and networks of *Drag Race*’s ambivalent fandom.

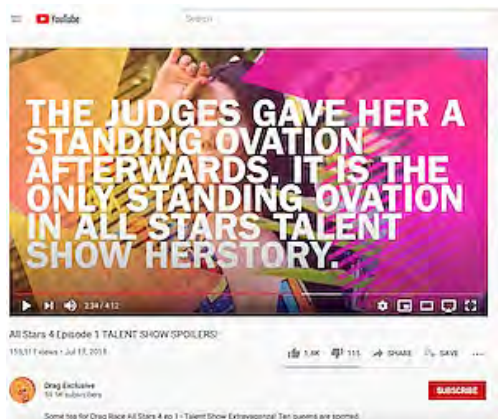


The home screen of r/rupsaulsdrage's spin-off community, r/SpoiledDragRace (screenshot taken 12/7/20).

A landing place for Reddit's renegade outlaw *Drag Race* spoilers, r/SpoiledDragRace was formed after a lawsuit against episode information leaks in the fandom's primary Reddit, r/rupsaulsdrage, instituted a harsh crackdown on any content in danger of violating intellectual property laws. The lawsuit came about in February 2018, during the airing of the third season of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*, which was the second season of the *Drag Race* empire to air on mainstream-facing basic-cable VH1 over its original LGBTQ-specific niche-cable network LOGO (Tracer 2018). Though it would be inaccurate to suggest *Drag*



RuPaul's Drag Race moved from Logo to VH1 for its ninth season. The season nine premiere featuring a guest appearance from Lady Gaga, and for the first time, RuPaul never appearing in drag. While these could be interpreted as gestures from *Drag Race* to endear itself to a more mainstream audience, the show was always seeking to bring drag to wider audiences.



Fake spoilers, often originating on Reddit, are disseminated throughout the internet on other platforms, including YouTube (screenshot taken 12/7/20).

Race “sold out” to normative audiences in its move to VH1—the show was always mainstream-facing, rarely controversial, and ambitious in recruiting new audiences, even before the move—the show’s new home almost certainly came with increased security around *Drag Race* as a financial asset for VH1’s parent company Viacom. As a result, Reddit’s traffic of fresh-from-set spoiled information became more forbidden. With these affective energies of danger, *RuPaul’s Drag Race’s* spoiler fans’ migration to their own subreddit intensifies the forbidden compulsion of the labor, now that the act has a clear criminal valence.

The techniques of spoiling have remained consistent from the initial Reddit to r/SpoiledDragRace. Uniquely compelling, *Drag Race* spoiler fans sort through a huge avalanche of data to determine who the participating queens are on each season before the cast list is officially announced. *Drag Race* Reddit users frequently speak of an on-season and an off-season to the site’s flows: On-season is when *Drag Race* is airing, and the community is dominated by thoughts, debates, reactions to each week’s episode. Off-season is when a smaller band of super-fans continue to post religiously and engage in the more dedicated spoiler-work: gossip around town, queens that are rumored to be on the show, multiple nightclub show cancellations that seem to reflect a similar block of time queens needed “off,” etc.. These investigations proceed in real time, often with the thrill of a live event as updates pour in, with heavy social capital allotted to the users that demonstrate the freshest connection to new *Drag Race* information. The affective charge of this environment has a lot to do with the online meta-cultural value of “firstness,” analyzed by Devon Powers (2017), that becomes more and more of a premium in the age of recursivity and boundless access to information that the Internet provides. Rumors are interrogated with voracious intensity, as users often become suspected as plants by the show’s producers specifically to mislead the spoiler fandom.

Users also post fake spoilers purely for the pleasure of feeling like the most informed Nancy Drew. On July 17, 2018, user byrnesbigsuit posted a supposed eyewitness account of the filming of the first episode of *RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars* season four that laid out a detailed scenario where underdog contestants Jasmine Masters, Farrah Moan, and Gia Gunn emerged the winners of the episode (ultimately, once the program aired, these were revealed as the first three queens eliminated). Quickly, the intelligence was disseminated online and thrilled the spoiler fandom. The following morning, presumably after a bleary-eyed internet hangover, u/byrnesbigsuit returned to r/SpoiledDragRace and fully admitted to constructing the narrative with no basis in reality. Most users expressed frustration, with a sense of humor at u/byrnesbigsuit’s open candor. User banjie_vanjie commented, “Guurl you have to admit that it was very well written” (u/valiismynname 2018). [5] Very rarely are users so open in their deception, forgeries and tall tales—recognized only months later in the airing of the actual episodes. This ephemeral case reveals many kinds of pleasure operating around *Drag Race’s* spoiler fandom, fans momentarily delighting in a “well written” narrative of drag competition. A user praising a would-be spoiler for its writing exposes tensions within the fandom between a desire for classic television narrative—one that *feels* familiar—and the hunt for the elusive raw data that would, ideally, defy such expectation. The phenomenon of fake spoilers also showcases the draw of the community as an end unto itself. Here the goal was not to perfectly anticipate the show, but rather to claim a unique insider status within the *Drag Race* spoiler kingdom.

[Go to page 2](#)

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

[illegible]

These drag queens are then investigated meticulously by the membership: if they are performing, if they auditioned for *Drag Race*, etc.. Some drag queens make their casting more apparent than others. Season nine's Nina Bo'Nina Brown had posted her audition video every year after she had been turned down for a spot; her silence in the summer of 2016 was very telling. Season ten's Yuhua Hamasaki's sudden drop in Twitter activity, and her abrupt return in October 2017 with the tweet, "I don't know why everyone keeps saying 'Congrats' to me for. I was in a fucking coma. Ya'll really want me dead or something?" equally seemed to sarcastically advertise her casting in big bold letters (Hamasaki 2017). With big hints like this, and an accumulation of little ones, the Nancy Drews are able to whittle the immense Google Spreadsheet down to a list of about 30, and following that a list of about 14, more or less the number *Drag Race* typically casts.

S13

[S13] Post-Sequester/Rumors S13 Nancy Drew Thread (3.0)

Submitted 3 months ago by NotRuPaul ·

Updated 8/31

SPECULATED CAST

- **Denali Foxx** (Chicago, IL): Appeared to have been inactive on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook during the sequester starting July 11, 2020 and returned to social media on August 31, 2020.
- **Elliott Puckett** (Las Vegas, NV): Appeared to have been inactive on Instagram, TikTok and Facebook during the sequester starting the weekend of July 11, 2020 and returned to social media on August 31, 2020.
- **Joey Jay** (Phoenix, AZ): Appeared to have been inactive on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook during the sequester starting the weekend of July 11, 2020 and returned to social media on August 31, 2020.
- **Kahmora Hall** (Chicago, IL): Appeared to have been inactive on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook during the sequester starting the weekend of July 11, 2020 and returned to social media on August 31, 2020.
- **Kandy Muse** (New York City, NY): Appeared to have been inactive on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook during the sequester starting the weekend of July 11, 2020 and returned to social media on August 31, 2020.
- **Lala Ri** (Atlanta, GA): Appeared to have been inactive on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook during the sequester starting the weekend of July 11, 2020 and returned to social media on August 31, 2020.
- **Mik** (Los Angeles, CA): Appeared to have been inactive on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook during the sequester starting the weekend of July 11, 2020 and returned to social media on August 31, 2020.
- **Olivia Lux** (New York City, NY): Appeared to have been inactive on Instagram and Facebook during the sequester starting the weekend of July 11, 2020 and returned to social media on August 31, 2020.

Spoiled

DRAG RACE

Search

SUBMIT LINK SUBMIT TEX

This post was submitted on 31 Aug 2020

124 points (99% upvoted)

<https://redd.it/1k1aya>

r/SpoiledDragRace posted a final (and correct) *Drag Race* season thirteen cast speculation list on August 31st 2020, roughly four months ahead of WOW's official announcement of the competing queens on December 9th (*screenshot taken 12/7/20*). Contestants Denali, Gottmik, Joey Jay, Kahmora Hall, Kandy Muse, Olivia Lux, Rosé, Symone, and Tina Turner were among the first to be guessed correctly (as early as July 2020), while others such as Tamisha Iman and Utica Queen were more difficult to confirm due to their spotty, inconsistent presences on social media.

This final list of 14 is a longer Reddit thread with links to performances, ephemeral video presentations of the queen, tweets or social media moments that seem particularly evocative of a personality, and lovingly written paragraphs hyping the queen as a competitor (these will be explored later as archival documents). Occasionally one queen is missed or one is guessed incorrectly, but overall the Nancy Drews' methodologies have been proven successful many times over.



Spoiler fans often construct outfit charts assembled from promotional material related to a season of *Drag Race*, in this example season six (2014) (*screenshot taken 12/7/20*). The numerous outfits and looks featured from contestants BenDeLaCrene, Courtney Act, and Adore Delano (the first three columns from the left) led spoiler fans to correctly guess their long duration in the competition. However, the eventual winner of the season, Bianca Del Rio (five columns from the right), was sparsely featured in promotional trailers, thus disguising her

overall success.

Besides the large-scale casting investigation, the Nancy Drews engage in some other spoiler-detection strategies that find occasional use. Often users create what are called “outfit charts” once a season’s promotional material (trailers, TV spots, clips, etc.) are released. In a chart format, screenshots of looks of each of the queens are arranged to see who claims the most variation in outfits presented, the assumption being more looks equals a longer duration in the competition. This doubles as a game of guessing the themes for each *Drag Race* season’s runways, as spoiler fans work to elucidate which outfits work together as part of a potential shared assignment. *Drag Race*’s advertising team seems to have gotten wise to this strategy, as the outfit charts have become less effective predictors in recent years, promotional materials using clips only from the first few episodes of an advertised season.

S12 Outfit Chart

| Contestant | Entrance | Confessional | Sparkle | Tulle Favric | Seasonal | ??? Runway | ??? Challenge |
|------------|----------|--------------|---------|--------------|----------|------------|---------------|
| Aiden | | | | | | | |
| Brita | | | | | | | |
| Crystal | | | | | | | |
| Dahlia | | | | | | | |
| Gigi | | | | | | | |
| Heidi | | | | | | | |
| Jackie | | | | | | | |
| Jaide | | | | | | | |
| Jan Sport | | | | | | | |
| Nicky | | | | | | | |
| Rock | | | | | | | |
| Sherry | | | | | | | |
| Widow | | | | | | | |

More recent outfit charts, like this one assembled for *Drag Race* season twelve, are less helpful than their predecessors in revealing competition spoilers (screenshot taken 12/7/20).

Elsewhere, the first few episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* season four were spoiled by a fan with access to closed captioning files. For this spoiler fans poured over computerized sheets of text almost resembling binary code, as if generating sparkling drag out of institutionalized media mechanics.

All this fan labor amounts to a massive and impressive fan archive that institutes practices carried over season-to-season, lending spoiler fandom a concrete mechanics. Abigail De Kosnik (2016) unpacks the creative work of fan archives in her book *Rogue Archives: Digital Memory and Media Fandom*. De Kosnik describes the role of digital media as loosening the reins on regimes of information and knowledge, allowing the idea of an archive to exist in varied forms serving various populations, including fans, whose attachments are often denigrated as without substance and ephemeral. Cultures of memory and preservation have been forever shifted by the ease of networked archives, in ways that have changed the very temporality of fandom and memory. De Kosnik

https://ru.misly.es

WEBVTT

```
1
00:00:00.000 --> 00:00:01.969
♪ See the super queen ♪

2
00:00:03.503 --> 00:00:06.640
[RuPaul] From the most sickening
reaches of the Ru-niverse,

3
00:00:06.640 --> 00:00:11.111
I searched among
my most legendary children

4
00:00:11.111 --> 00:00:13.146
to find queens

5
00:00:13.146 --> 00:00:17.084
with the superpowers
of charisma, uniqueness,

6
00:00:17.084 --> 00:00:19.319
nerve and talent,

7
00:00:19.319 --> 00:00:22.022
to join forces
with the super queens

8
00:00:22.022 --> 00:00:25.692
that rule the Drag Race
Hall of Fame.

9
00:00:25.692 --> 00:00:28.462
But remember, my All Stars,

10
00:00:28.462 --> 00:00:33.333
with great power
comes great responsibility.
```

The first episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* season four was spoiled on r/SpoiledDragRace through a file listing dialogue for close captioning (screenshot taken 12/7/20). Its simple mechanical repetition of text stands in significant contrast to the sparkle, glamour, and frills of *Drag Race* as a television product.

elaborates:

“Cultural memory has...gone rogue with respect to its own temporality, its own place in the order and timing of things...In the past, the chain of media production appeared to conclude with the culture industries’ distribution of a finished product. At present, each media commodity becomes, at the instant of its release, an archive to be plundered, an original to be memorized, copied, and manipulated- a starting point or springboard for the receivers’ creativity, rather than an end unto itself...Memory has gone rogue in the sense that it has come loose from its fixed place in the production cycle. It now may be found anywhere, or everywhere, in the chain of making.” (4)

Rather than receiving the finished product of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and allowing its fan-relationships to spiral from there, r/SpoiledDragRace is a very literal rogue archive in its disruption of the dominant media production cycle, enfolding and memorizing a kind of ephemera usually “too early” for consumption. Not only are Reddit Nancy Drews their own active producers; their production confounds a traditional temporality of textual construction and the authority of its makers therein. Spoiler fandoms continue the work of LGBTQ fan spaces in building community through the queer potential of a text (see Lothian 2018) with this uniquely direct subversion of authority—seeking out the text and arranging it in advance of its debut. The potential of spoiler fandom, therefore, is a richly queer exploration of different kinds of fan/media relationships.

RuPaul's Drag Race has symbolically sought to control information and retain a presence as an entity ahead of fan prediction, epitomized by the show’s characterization of a contestant of the seventh season, Sasha Belle.[6] A footnote amongst *Drag Race*’s prodigiously fabulous alumni, Belle is nonetheless an instructive example of how *Drag Race* the televisual narrative production responds to queens who claim to “know” what *Drag Race* is more thoroughly than *Drag Race* itself. Belle had an extremely short run on the program, losing a lip sync to Katya in the second episode, eliminating her from the competition. Lacking even the mystery and tragedy of being the first queen to “sashay away” in elimination, the second-to-last placement has doomed many *Drag Race* contestants to obscurity. Sasha Belle is narrativized within her minimal season screen-time with a mocking tone, characterized by the show’s production and editing teams as a *Drag Race* super-fan who had, in her words, “cracked the code” on how to win the competition through intensive study and fandom. Her detailed knowledge didn’t prove helpful at the site of *RuPaul's Drag Race* proper; the queen was eliminated in a clumsily oversized blonde wig with a dejected whine of “I think I overthunk my strategy...” as she packed her bags (“Glamazonian Airways”). Sasha Belle was immortalized in *RuPaul's Drag Race* spoiler fan communities, where her name and propensity for code-cracking, however ineffectual, adorned a frequent discussion thread on r/SpoiledDragRace used for new theories and speculation: “Dear diary... it’s me, Sasha Belle & I cracked the code.”



Despite positioning herself as a super-fan and the 'ultimate code-cracker,' Sasha Belle was eliminated on the second episode of season seven.



The "Snatch Game" challenge, here in season 10, is a notable part of every *Drag Race* season. In season 10, Aquaria was named the winner for her stellar impression of Melania Trump, while Monique Heart's mediocre Maxine Waters eliminated her from the competition.

RuPaul's Drag Race's illustration of Sasha Belle's detailed fan enthusiasm as laughably ineffectual supported its own desire to be seen as an unpredictable, twisting and turning reality television roller coaster, whose fans couldn't hope to get ahead of its plotting. The folly of Sasha Belle, clumsy code-cracker, sought to prove the outright authority of *Drag Race* over its fandom, and by extension, over drag, an art form that RuPaul alone can judge (as is her usual script, "The decision is mine to make").

Michael Shetina (2018) studied this phenomenon in the cultural content of *Drag Race's* challenges, and how they function to place the show in a position of ownership over queer culture, deciding what pop culture references and elements are sufficiently part of a queer canon. Staples of the program, such as "the Snatch Game," a parody of the game show *The Match Game*, look to operationalize the contents of the queer cultural canon, elevate *Drag Race* as a community historian, and reinforce "citations [that] do not produce a democratic archive but rather a hierarchical terrain that elevates forms of knowledge while excluding others," most often valuing a cis white gay male perspective over a larger LGBTQ worldview (147). Citations gesture towards archives of knowledge which in turn contour publics and their resulting social membership, instituting hierarchies that position the citer at the very top. *r/SpoiledDragRace* in this way bears a sense of radical potential as a counter-archive, interrupting WOW's favored flow of citation, from queens to production to the fans, and cutting out the middle man's industrial gatekeeping.

Pre-making: the queer art of spoiling

To be part of a fandom doesn't necessarily mean enjoying a media text on the exact terms as its producers have crafted it. Spoilers, advance knowledge of key story information, suggest in their basic etymological construction a betrayal or ruining of the mechanics of storytelling, a mechanics that fans would, supposedly, seek to maintain. While traditional principles of narrative imply a heft of viewer pleasure resides in surprise, mystery, and questioning, the clash of spoiler hunting and media fandom necessitates a more refined approach to understanding the role of spoilers within media. [7] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell, in their 2007 article on spoilers, centered their work on the television program *Lost* and let its spoiler fandom speak as a creative extension of the show's allure. Because *Lost* is an intricate mystery with layers of story to unlock, its fandom is seen as detectives, plumbing

"a complex apparatus of conspiracy and mystery...to demonstrate their collective intelligence in action, charting relationships, creating maps, and decoding minute clues on discussion boards, wikis, and blogs."

Spoilers become the holy grail of detective work, intimately wed to the processes of investigation that *Lost* is already encouraging as a mystery. Gray and Mittell specify four hypotheses of viewer pleasure in spoilers: spoilers as game (a race to get to knowledge the fastest), spoilers as anti-fandom (an act of destroying the intended surprises of the show), spoilers as community, and spoilers as entertainment (these latter two emphasizing the lure of fan spaces over the show



The television series *Lost*'s labyrinthine and compelling mysteries made Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell's initial analysis of spoiler fans rely on a comparison to detectives, eager to unlock the show's secrets. Participating in a spoiler-fandom was often like staring into the open hatch, the notorious cliffhanger of *Lost*'s first season, for a privileged early look at plot information.

itself). These read as four hypothetical breeds of “spoiler fans,” a term Gray and Mittell specifically coin that I continue to use in this study.

Gray and Mittell emphasize the practice of spoiling as a way fans “take control of their pleasures and customize their narrative experience to fulfill their fan desires.” The tone is slightly condescending. In their audience survey, Gray and Mittell note the negative perceptions of spoiler fans, chief among them the image of a childish viewer who cannot stand to wait for amusement. The authors cannot help falling into that cliché themselves when they conclude, “Spoiler fans attempt to eliminate their undesirable anticipation...,” framing impatience as a primary motivator.

The spoiler fans of *RuPaul's Drag Race* leave this paradigm altogether and operate on another. Implicit in their spoiler-labor is a skepticism of the veracity of the final image a text offers. Rather than impatience, spoiler-labor in *RuPaul's Drag Race* fan communities functions as the means of enjoying the barest skeleton of a *Drag Race* text, relishing queer opacity[8] before it is blown off the map by the authority of a visual image. The genre distinction between *Lost*'s fictional sci-fi mystery and reality competition television no doubt enables this nuance.

Jonathan Gray (2010) refines this work in his later book *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. Delving more deeply into the world of “paratext”—fan culture, promotional materials, and other texts alongside a primary media object bolstering and transforming its culture life—Gray re-contextualizes the way spoilers are written about. Gray writes:

“...some fans recount the experience of falling more heavily for a text's fan discussion site than for the text itself. If today's television and film paratextuality extends the horizons of the narrative universe well beyond what ‘the text itself’ offers, surely some audience members will find that the universe is more interesting at its horizons. In such cases, these audience members may still consider themselves fans or at least viewers of the text, but here rather than simply modify or inflect the text, the paratexts may in time become the text, as the audience members take their cues regarding what a text means from the paratext's images, signs, symbols, and words, rather than from the film or program's.” (46)

Such a process occurs with *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s fandom. Whereas Gray and Mittell's original article on spoilers connected everything back to the text itself as the ultimate arbiter and point of focus, here Gray extrapolates from the suggestions of “spoilers as community” to indicate a new power shift entirely away from the text. Although still participating in a network of meaning with the text itself, spoiler fandoms as paratexts “extend the horizon” and so doing, transform the text at the center of fan labor. The fierce loyalty the *RuPaul's Drag Race* Reddit commands at all times of the year, regardless if the show is on or not, proves the vitality of a paratextual community.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Nancy Drews work to get ahold of the knowledge of *Drag Race* contestants before they appear legible within the space of a commodified, assimilationist television show; the ultimate spoiler. This rare and difficult to detect “before” (when a queen is cast, filming, and then waiting for the show to air) feeds off of an increasingly mythical, over-valORIZED queer past. José Esteban Muñoz (2009) describes queer utopianism as “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (1), and he locates it within texts stemming from “before, around, and slightly after the Stonewall rebellion of 1969” (3). This utopian spirit often looks backward, finding optimism in the queerness of the past: a mythical affective zone that is also a powerful community rallying point. The search for the spoiled *Drag Race* “before” emanates from the same need for queer utopianism Muñoz describes. The present’s “quagmire” often takes the shape of “pragmatic gay politics” stunting queer imaginations with neoliberal and privatizing institutions such as marriage (32). I would argue, this quagmire is also felt as the momentum and exhaustion of a reality competition series endlessly churning out reproductions of a queer identity increasingly distant from its roots in radical, working class, and queer of color communities. What is the utopian promise of drag queens before *Drag Race* gets to them?

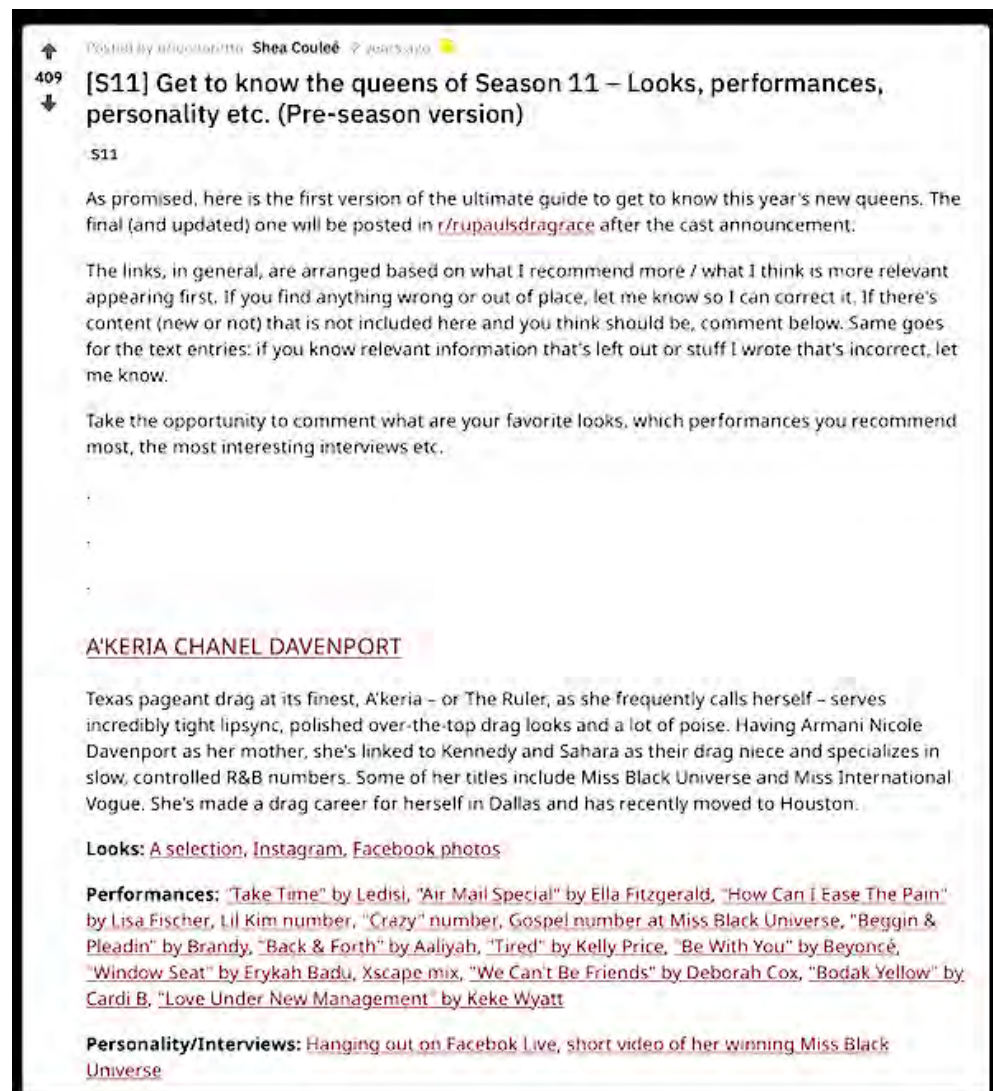
Gray’s “horizon of meaning” is certainly not the same as Muñoz’s “warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (1). Yet both are defined by a lack of fulfillment with the boundaries of a presented text, and an activating current that looks to move beyond it. The online fan publics are an investigatory practice determined to “know” these queens before the series tells us (and the queen themselves) who they are and what they will become. When drag itself is a time machine, spoiler fandom works in an effort to reanimate the challenge of time within *Drag Race*’s glossily non-confrontational product. For spoiler fans, spoiling is part of a queer practice of reading around reality television edits, contested representation, and media branding to mainstream audiences, in hopeful search of the “drag” queer past maintains on the present.

“Early” is the affective incubation of spoiler fandom, a meld of “live” and “first” that proves inviting in forming online social publics. I describe this spoiler-work as “pre-making,” the use of spoilers to chart out a contra-text invested in a utopian imagining of a fandom’s central text that is markedly distinct from the one producers are ultimately sure to create. Spoilers deny the authority of a production company’s vision, and time-travel through fan relationality to a nebulous space of queer opacity that is able to dream beyond the confines of political foreclosure. This is coincident with an increasing alienation and skepticism with the “reality” being presented within reality television.

Spoilers typically occupy a temporality of “what will happen,” emphasizing a future media text revelation on the horizon. In reality show spoiler fandoms the more precise phrasing would be something like “what will have already happened.” In the particular culture of *Drag Race* spoiler fandoms—with their skepticism and disassociation from the central text as authority—this specifies further to multiple temporalities: “what could have happened” and “what would have happened,” conditional temporalities premised on the inherent unfaithfulness of *Drag Race* as a representational platform. These temporalities are intensely combined with pre- and post-*Drag Race* contexts of political weight, temporalities open to revision, pre-making, and creative elaboration.

Case study: A’Keria Chanel Davenport, season eleven

Some of the richest sites of pre-making on r/SpoiledDragRace are the written elaborations of queens' identities prior to any confirmation of their casting by *Drag Race's* producers. Created in the cycle of decoding a new cast, these "Get to know..." posts add color to unknown queens' profiles and extensively archive available videos of their performances, as well as other social media ephemera that gives some sense of their glamour, artistry, and personality.



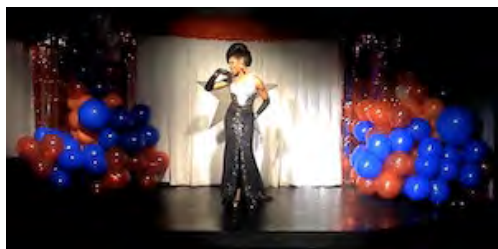
'The Get to know...' compilation posts of r/SpoiledDragRace provided a platform for pre-making the queens' identities and admiring their artistry prior to the show's translation of their talents (*screenshot taken 12/7/20*). Season eleven's, pictured here, included over a thousand words of description hyping the queens as competitors, links to their social media accounts, and links to over 300 videos of performances, media appearances, makeup tutorials, etc.

For seasons 10 and 11, these compilations were spear-headed by one user, leonoretta, who looms large enough in the community the subsequent season 12 "Get to know..." post claimed to be "Inspired by the posts u/Leonoretta used to make" (u/Grotesquette 2019). While initially written by u/leonoretta, the posts become community documents edited and elaborated upon by other users at their request.

The season 11 "Get to know..." post appeared on r/SpoiledDragRace on Sunday July 22nd 2018, a sizable six months ahead of the official announcement of the season 11 cast on January 24 2019, and its television debut in February (Nolfi 2019). The queens' descriptions are written with a great deal of affection and



The first official 'reveal' of a new season's contestants comes with the publication of a glamorous photoshoot with all of the queens in fabulous attire usually united by a color theme or concept. A'Keria Chanel Davenport's look (pictured) was significantly different from most of her drag looks within the show, with a larger wig and more emphasis on volume and stretched textures.



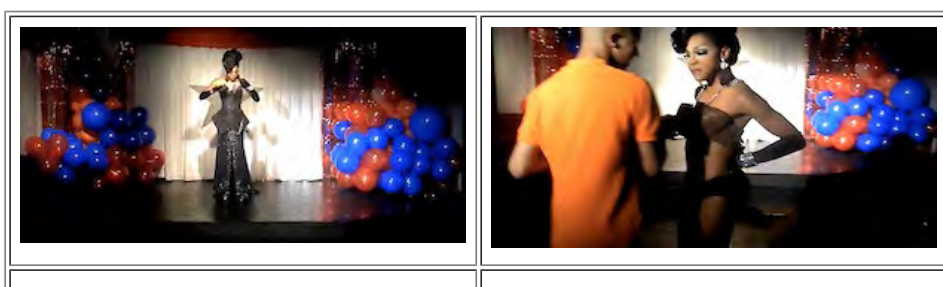
At the start of her "Window Seat" performance, recorded in a 2011 YouTube clip, A'Keria Chanel Davenport strikes a pose in the center of the stage. The lighting is harsh and assaultive, a strong contrast from the softer professional lighting of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

anticipation, while retaining a slight neutrality and openness to how she will fare in the competition. For example, u/leonoretta's description of A'Keria Chanel[9] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Davenport reads:

"Texas pageant drag at its finest, A'Keria—or The Ruler, as she frequently calls herself—serves incredibly tight lipsync, polished over-the-top drag looks and a lot of poise. Having Armani Nicole Davenport as her mother, she's linked to Kennedy and Sahara [drag race contestants from seasons 7 and 2 respectively] as their drag niece and specializes in slow, controlled R&B numbers. Some of her titles include Miss Black Universe and Miss International Vogue. She's made a drag career for herself in Dallas and has recently moved to Houston." (u/leonoretta 2019)

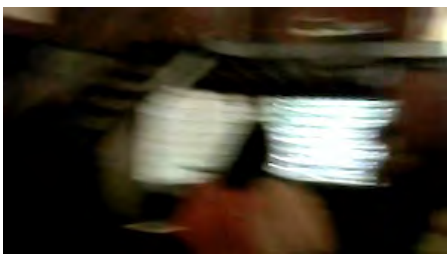
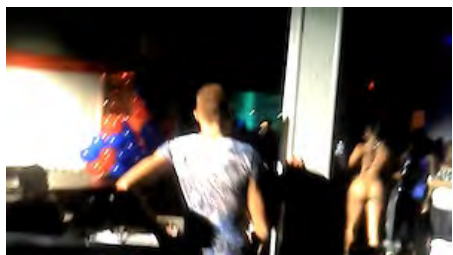
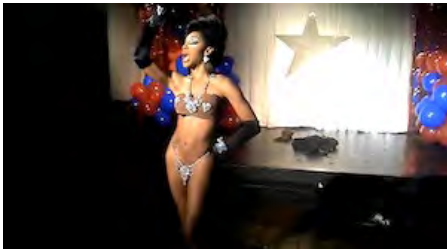
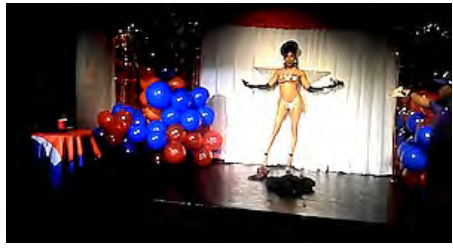
This short biography for Davenport begins to pre-make a queenly identity worth celebrating, even suggesting directions that were not ultimately explored in *RuPaul's Drag Race* (for instance, Davenport's specialization in "slow, controlled R&B numbers" was never addressed on *Drag Race*, despite her making it all the way to the top four finalists). Davenport was the hit of the post, garnering the most comments from Reddit users anticipating her arrival to *Drag Race*. The most up-voted comment on the post quoted her self-given nickname "The Ruler" with the simple hearty affirmation "Oh, work, bitch." Davenport's bold claiming of "The Ruler" was another element left out of her *Drag Race* tenure, giving this pre-making aggregate a bombastic royalty more provocative and confrontational than the "perfect pageant queen" made manifest in *Drag Race's* narrative universe. Hardly "the ruler," in the text of *RuPaul's Drag Race* season eleven itself, Davenport was frequently minimized in screen-time in favor of bigger personalities and queens more central to the season's competitive and backstage in-fighting storylines.

Though the prose may be relatively direct and unadorned, the excess of these spoiler compilations comes through in their archiving of links to performances and videos online: exhaustive and thorough for performers with little public visibility. Included in Davenport's entry are links to fourteen lip sync performance videos, including one to "Window Seat" by Erykah Badu from 2011, eight years prior to Davenport's eventual reality television debut. The "Window Seat" video is difficult to watch, the sound a clumsy haze of feedback under which Erykah Badu is barely audible. Impacting the sound too is the loud screams of adoration from Davenport's fans, the love breaking barriers of mediated clarity. The setting is a small theatrical club environment, over-lit with an intense spotlight, with piles of balloons on either side of Davenport. The queen struggles with a botched outfit reveal, her dress sticking clumsily to a bikini underneath.



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| Davenport struggles briefly with an outfit reveal mid-way through her number. The chaos of a reveal gone-wrong, or an amateurish lack of precision in performance, underlines the ephemeral value of the video as a precious glimpse of 'the real queen' in low-key, mundane moments of dysfunction. | Davenport approaches a customer during her "Window Seat" performance. |

The handheld camera wanders haphazardly as Davenport searches for tips from distracted customers first in the front rows and then back around the perimeters of her audience. Both the visuals and audio a blur, A'Keria is barely visible at times: a shape stretching and contorting to the distorted vocals of Erykah Badu ("Akeria Davenport *Window Seat* 4/3/2011"). Yet this performance sits archived with the rest of season eleven's drag ephemera found scattering the internet prior to the contestants' legible fame as reality television stars.

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| The camera struggles to keep up with and find A'Keria during her "Window Seat" performance. | The fleeting contact to the queens are mirrored in the aesthetics of the videos themselves, low-grade home video barely finding the queens as they move around the periphery of visibility. |
|  |  |
| Yet the videos still provide a kind of ephemeral glamour, a queen triumphant in radically raggedy surroundings. | As Davenport finishes her number, a hand extends from the audience to offer her a tip. |

Far from the production sheen of a completed *Drag Race* season, the video suggests a modest drag put on under mundane strain and difficulty, the basic hardships of queer performance victories unto themselves. Unlike *Drag Race*, which modifies to new technological and entertainment industry standards every year, videos like Davenport's "Window Seat" performance are almost radically timely, subject to immediate obsolescence. The archiving and love displayed for small-scale drag performances like these, presented as spoilers to a reality television product, promote an affective network of remembering and pre-making, radically raggedy in the face of an intimidating capitalist franchise. For *RuPaul's Drag Race* fans, spoiling is both the sneak preview and the return to a more antique and idiosyncratic practice of drag, a queer mobility through time.



A'Keria Chanel Davenport performs "Air Mail Special" by Ella Fitzgerald. This video shares with the others a sense of poor lighting and haphazard camera focus.



This pre-*Drag Race* photo of A'Keria Chanel Davenport in drag, a selfie taken in the mirror likely before going on stage, is one of the photographs archived on r/SpoiledDragRace as a pre-made celebration of the queen.

For fans eager to support black drag queens amidst the foreboding anticipation of a fandom known to be racist, this early praise of A'Keria Chanel Davenport is equally a chance to assert anti-racist queer of color love and community. The ephemeral evidence of Davenport's pre-*Drag Race* fabulousness evokes Tavia Nyong'o (2019)'s concept of afro-fabulation, a "theory and practice of black time and temporality" in queer black visual art that finds within archival evidence of the mundane and everyday "a black feminist and queer repository of counter-conduct, finding in collective memory an ever-renewing series of stratagems for aesthetic oppositionality." The "Window Seat" video, endowed with contexts of value beyond its original intention, is an example of this process. While Nyong'o is clear not to claim moments of afro-fabulation as "decisive act[s] of agency," they stand in complication of a textual logic that is "already false" and operating under anti-black systems of power (5-6). One of A'Keria Chanel Davenport's other popular performances amongst the Reddit commenters was a lipsync to Ella Fitzgerald's "Air Mail Special," a jazz track with heavy vocal scatting that would have little value as a *Drag Race* lipsync song, the *Drag Race* catalog dominated by contemporary pop hits coordinated with larger industry viability, and frequently by guest stars there to promote their own albums. In this case, the compilation quite literally foregrounds the past, and queer of color affection for icons of black women's history, and defies the present.

A'Keria Chanel Davenport would ultimately walk through the pink archway onto the *Drag Race* set, posed and armed with a quick and catchy introductory line: "Oh yes, it's me: Miss A'keria D-A-V-E-N-P-O-R, and as you can see, I'm the motherfucking T." On season 11, Davenport would represent a standard of pageant perfection thoroughly intimidating and free of any blemishes. But the past and its remembrances poses a threat, as Elizabeth Freeman reminds us in *Time Binds*, writing of "the interesting threat that the genuine *past*-ness of the past- its opacity and illegibility, its stonewalling in the face of our most cherished theoretical paradigms- sometimes makes to the political present" (63). The past A'Keria, cherished and adored in an act of pre-making by spoiler-fan communities, comes with a conceptualization of drag in tow not on a progress narrative trajectory, but rather a challengingly beloved mundanity. A'Keria Chanel Davenport the pre-made aggregate might be a lot freer and more comfortable than her *Drag Race* production equivalent. Pageantry "spoiled," yet deified.

Two days after the posting of the "Get to know..." compilation, A'Keria Chanel Davenport posted an image to her Instagram. Three simple lines of text, the post read:

"2016: The Caterpillar
2017: The Cocoon
2018: The Butterfly"

For any *Drag Race* fans on Reddit having just collected a new queen to obsess over Davenport's Instagram post reinforced the looming temporal narrative suggesting personal transformation: from club queen to superstar. But for those who met A'Keria early through the queer art of spoiling, the authority of that forward-moving narrative is loosened, and looks back on caterpillar and cocoon before the butterfly (mizakeriachanel 2018).



A'Keria Chanel Davenport's "Caterpillar/Cocoon/Butterfly" Instagram post from July 24, 2018, indicates and references a narrative of personal transformation, even in a time before the 'official' announcement of her appearance on *Drag Race* (screenshot taken 12/7/20). True to online fandom standards, even with Davenport's *Drag Race* career still in pre-making, a user comments with a reference to the *Drag Race* empire, user nickifenty commenting "its like a butterfly in a cocoon," a reference to Jasmine Masters' attempts to explain an outfit in *Drag Race*'s seventh season.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

A sinking pride boat: ambivalence and utopia

As season seven *Drag Race* contestant Jasmine Masters once famously stated, “*RuPaul’s Drag Race* has fucked up drag.” [10] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Although Masters was referring principally to the aesthetics of drag queens since *RuPaul’s Drag Race*’s debut, the statement endures as a fandom-wide calling card for the violence, social and political, perpetrated in the wake of the show’s success. For fans both spoiled and not, watching *RuPaul’s Drag Race* often means sorting through a wealth of problematic and disappointing material. The detective work of the Nancy Drews takes on a more politically weighted valence when confronted with the series’ cruelties and political violence. The political cruelties frequently adjoining a season of *Drag Race* can function as a production of distance between the fandom and the show’s creators, potentially intensifying spoiler fans’ quest to pre-make the series and view it apart from its post-production gloss and manipulation. Without suggesting that every spoiler fan acts out of political objection to *Drag Race*, I mean to emphasize the growing distance and skepticism between the fandom and the series itself, a movement roughly simultaneous with the growth of online spoiler communities.

Bringing to light the transphobia and other political violences of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* becomes a fan activity similarly constituted to the hunt for spoilers; rumor and gossip with ethical heft. Both defang the authority of the program, either as a reality show with secrets or a homonormative poster child for new forms of LGBTQ acceptance. Being “informed” as a *Drag Race* fan doesn’t only mean a knowledge of spoilers—it refers to an awareness of in-community knowledge threads about the show and its participants’ limitations, as a contextualization of what it means to be a “fan” with some qualifications. These following revelations, which circulate on fan Reddits the same way spoiled information does, define the ambivalence of parts of the *Drag Race* fandom, an ambivalence opened and supported by online channels of fan communication.

The transphobic views of RuPaul, the supposedly warm and welcoming mother of the franchise itself, are a frequent cause of concern and distrust amongst the fandom. A series of transphobic events notably rocked *RuPaul’s Drag Race* during the show’s sixth season in 2014. A mini-challenge titled “Female or Shemale?,” where drag queens judged hairlines, breasts, and clothed genitalia, among other body parts, up-close to decide if they belonged to a cis woman or a drag queen, immediately offended many trans viewers.



Jasmine Masters RuPaul Dragrace fucked up drag

Jasmine Masters’ “*RuPaul’s Drag Race* has fucked up drag” viral video has become an enduring symbol of dissatisfaction with the various impacts *Drag Race* has had on culture, even beyond the initial complaints of Masters herself.



BenDeLaCreme, Bianca Del Rio, and Laganja Estranja play “Female or Shemale?” on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. The game immediately drew criticism from many viewers for its fixation on judging the correspondence between external gender presentation and genitalia.

This controversy spilled over into a debate on Twitter about RuPaul’s use of words such as “shemale” or “tranny,” both obscenities frequently aimed at the trans community, an identity RuPaul does not share. RuPaul insisted on his right to use the words, identifying those offended as “fringe people who are looking for story lines to strengthen their identity as victims,” adding “don’t you dare tell me what I can do or say.” Season six runner-up Courtney Act, finished with filming and obligations to the show at that point, entered the conversation with a more measured response, urging RuPaul to actually listen to trans voices rather than condescend to them. Equally, she joined the dissenters protesting the “Female or Shemale” mini-challenge, acts that together got her blocked across all of RuPaul’s social media platforms, with rumors ever-generating about fights between the two (Harbour 2014). This controversy later resulted in the series’ dismissal of the catchphrase “You’ve Got She-Mail!,” used by RuPaul to first address the queens in each episode (Duffy 2015). The entire “Female or Shemale” segment has been scrubbed from digital and streaming files of the original episode on legal sites, although rogue archives continue to possess it, in defiance of *Drag Race*’s authority of information.

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| <p>Episodes of <i>RuPaul’s Drag Race</i> used to include a segment where a televised RuPaul introduced an episode’s challenge to the queens called ‘SheMail.’ Once voices in protest to the transphobia of the word reached a critical mass, the segment’s title and icon were removed from the flow of the show.</p> | <p>Peppermint, <i>Drag Race</i> season nine runner-up, pictured here at the season nine finale, was in the bizarre and difficult position of having her achievements undermined by the transphobia of <i>Drag Race</i>’s host, RuPaul.</p> |

Transphobia from RuPaul and *RuPaul’s Drag Race* re-ignited in 2018 when, in an



RuPaul
@RuPaul

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In the 10 years we've been casting Drag Race, the only thing we've ever screened for is charisma uniqueness nerve and talent. And that will never change.



In an attempt to respond to rising criticism of his transphobic views online, RuPaul issued a statement paired with a flag of greens and yellow. Initially confusing, Twitter users ultimately discovered the green-and-yellow flag was the result of a Google image search for the phrase "trains flag," likely a faulty attempt to search for "trans flag." The ineptitude of this attempted apology cemented an image of RuPaul as distant from queer socio-political engagement and apathetic of the rights of trans people.



A tearful Monica Beverly Hillz comes out as a trans woman on the *Drag Race* stage in a season five episode. Moments like this narrativized the acceptance of trans people within *Drag Race*'s diegetic world, even as they continued to face discrimination from the show's host and casting policies.

interview with *The Guardian*, RuPaul stated he would not allow trans queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race* if they had pursued any kind of medical transition. These statements were particularly hurtful and confusing in light of the success of Peppermint, an out trans woman and drag queen who had been the runner-up on what was then the most recent season of *Drag Race*, with her exact medical transition status not a matter of clear public information (as it often is not, pointing to the irrational transphobia motivating RuPaul's remarks). The story quickly going viral and inciting anger throughout the fandom and beyond, RuPaul re-affirmed his remarks tweeting "You can take performance enhancing drugs and still be an athlete, just not in the Olympics." This time more people involved with the show took deliberate steps to distance themselves from RuPaul, including judge Michelle Visage, then-current-reigning winner Sasha Velour, and the numerous contestants who had come out as trans since appearing on the show, including season four's Jiggly Caliente (Mulkerin 2018). Drag artistry has its roots in the cultures of both trans women and cis gay men. RuPaul's transphobia epitomizes the effort by cis gay men to take proprietary ownership over drag, away from trans women, in the late twentieth century. *RuPaul's Drag Race* perpetuates the false historicism of drag as a cis gay male art form, often by incorporating drag queens coming out as trans (Sonique in season two, Monica Beverly Hillz in season five) as if drag is a gift to be extended to them through cis gay charity.

If the form of drag that became a successful public commodity through *Drag Race* is openly hostile to the participation of trans people, it also emphasizes a system of escalating costs and socio-economic inequality that further removes drag from the working-class associations of the Harlem Ball scene and the other iconographies influencing the show. *Drag Race* is an expensive venture, growing more and more expensive every season. In an episode of *Drag Race Untucked*[11] accompanying the show's tenth season, contestants Miz Cracker and Kameron Michaels, while lounging in lavish mermaid costumes, briefly discussed the specter of financing a *Drag Race* run. Cracker remarks, "My life and my funds and my financial future, I put it on the line because this is so important." Michaels responds, "I spent more coming into this competition than I did as a downpayment on my house." Not to be outdone, Cracker counters, "I spent more on this competition than I did on college." In the same episode, Monique Heart is eliminated from the competition, mentioning her difficulties relying on a home-made wardrobe (that she was often finishing the day of different runway themes) rather than the pre-purchased clothes of her competitors. As she departs the Werk Room with her belongings, Heart states "I may not have the finest things in the room—but, Bitch, you can't tell me that I ain't sickening and you can't tell me that I am not talented" (*RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked!*). The optics of two white queens discussing enormous financial transactions, as a black queen is eliminated from the competition for her lack thereof, paints a brutal picture of the unspoken requirements and power differentials present in the drag favored by *Drag Race*.



Season ten contestant Miz Cracker wore a sparkling mermaid outfit as she discussed the financial impacts of preparing for *Drag Race*.



Monique Heart's elimination raised difficult questions about the financial barriers to success on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, issues the show frequently incorporates into the program's narrative and character development but without resolution.

Fans on Reddit took note of the finances of *Drag Race* contestants following the elimination of Honey Davenport in season eleven, just three episodes in at effectively thirteenth place. User Kingkabs posted an excerpt from an episode of Yuhua Hamasaki's YouTube series that showed Davenport describing her financial expense related to *Drag Race*, which she claimed to be around \$20,000 from various sources, and that a fellow New York City queen Dusty Ray Bottoms had spent a similar amount. Davenport had mentioned elsewhere to the press that she was homeless prior to being cast on *Drag Race* (Rudolph 2019). Given that Davenport was eliminated just three episodes into the season, the majority of her debt was spent on outfits that would never grace television screens, and her minimal screen-time jeopardized her ability to receive the love and attention of fans, and thus, the hearty club appearance fees that typically buoy *Drag Race* contestants after their season's premiere. User Catsooti responded to Davenport's situation with a call to transform *Drag Race*, writing,

"This is why I think there either needs to be income assistance or a price cap for the queens. Maybe even more design challenges can help out because it really is an unfair stack against the poorer queens... That's right. I'm proposing a socialist drag race" (u/Kingkabs 2019).

This fan comment came the closest to resembling a genuine call for revolution, but the "socialist drag race" it proposes, one out to equal the socio-economic scales, might be found in the spoiler fan archives themselves, where, inherently opposed to the financial swell of *Drag Race's* competition, humble drag excellence is venerated and worshipped without an ever-inflating, unofficial pay required to play.

The many contexts of socio-political violence waged by *RuPaul's Drag Race* are both stabilized by the show's textuality itself. The two specifically profiled here—transphobia and the rising cost of competing—are encoded in an episode from *Drag Race's* fourth season. In "Float Your Boat," contestants decorated individual boats with ornamentation for LGBTQ pride (each assigned a different color of the rainbow flag). In the introduction to the challenge, RuPaul invokes Marsha P. Johnson, the trans woman often credited with throwing the first brick at the Stonewall Riot, as an ancestor to himself and the *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestants ("Float Your Boat").



Honey Davenport (right) discusses the financial cost of *Drag Race* with Yuhua Hamasaki (left) on Hamasaki's web-series *Bootleg Opinions*. The title of the show itself suggests a humble, thrifty point of comparison to the heightening classist standards of *Drag Race's* fashion criteria.



In season four's "Float Your Boat" pride challenge, the queens were tasked with decorating individual pride boats in accordance with the colors of the original rainbow LGBTQ pride flag.



The queens displayed their finished pride boats with accompanying looks on the runway. Season four's eventual winner Sharon Needles paired her assigned color (green) with its original associated value in the LGBTQ pride flag, nature, in a garden of Eden theme that won her praise with the judges. Willam was declared the winner of the challenge for her chic blue designer boat, while Milan was eliminated for a

While Johnson did identify as a drag queen as well as a trans woman, the terms in the late sixties had far more blur and interconnection than they would for *Drag Race*'s audience, often labeled quite enthusiastically by the production as young LGBTQ people eager to use the show as a vehicle to learn about queer culture. The uninformed viewer accepts drag, through *Drag Race*'s definition, as cis gay men performing as women.

This act therefore negates Johnson's trans identity retroactively, occupying her space and using her lineage to create a transphobic gay drag of homonormativity and assimilation. In so doing, *Drag Race*'s transphobia often works to gentrify aspects of trans history, painting over nuance with homonormative strategies. Equally distant from the show's representation of Stonewall is the working-class nature of its uprising, complicit with what Richard Blum (2019) describes as a failure of mainstream LGBTQ groups to commemorate Stonewall as "a riot by angry working-class and gender non-conforming community members who were fed up with police abuse," opting instead for a hollow image of pride parades without a classed context. Cáel M. Keegan (2016), on Roland Emmerich's 2015 film *Stonewall*, describes this phenomenon in media as privilege and power working to "colonise the aesthetic space of the LGBTQ cinematic archive as its representational subjects" (52). This episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* does exactly that: creating a configuration of drag for the masses that rears back to disempower the communities it claims to support.

RuPaul's Drag Race's claiming of Stonewall emphasizes the difficult politics of citation at work between queer cultures and entertainment capitalism. Drag is about citation, frequently the citation of a gendered or sexualized past, and *Drag Race*'s citation of Stonewall is an inherently oppressive one, taking an event of immense community importance, denying its trans and working-class basis, and fraudulently perpetrating a takeover of Stonewall in the name of a sanitized neoliberal proprietary drag. Unlike *Drag Race*'s historical archive which seeks to gentrify and to claim, the rogue archive assembled by fans on Reddit lusts abstractly for a queer past, before *Drag Race*, that explicitly exceeds its grasp. This kind of archive can only be rendered in ephemera, the pre-fame, the pre-stardom, and the mundane. This makes it a work of fan labor that is abstractly backwards-looking for the utopian potential in performative arts like drag that would seemingly be found in a product like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, if not for the interference of transphobia, capitalism, and profit-minded sanitization. The queer art of spoiling unearths an archive to continue the supposed mission of the show, rendered impossible in a homonormative framework.

RuPaul's Drag Race rushes to Stonewall, the same site of Muñoz's queer utopianism, to gentrify it, fulfilling a capitalistic logic and denying drag's roots in trans and queer of color survival. In response, queer utopian feeling escapes to *what could have happened* and *what would have happened*, the imagined temporalities of spoiler fandom. The mutation of fandom into spoiler fandom suggests a yearning outside of the hateful pragmatism built into a cis gay media empire. To pre-make *RuPaul's Drag Race* is to honor a utopian dream of unvarnished drag quickly receding into the past.

Conclusion

On March 24 2017, in Chicago for an academic conference and hiding from my professional obligations, I went to a viewing party at a local gay club for the premiere of *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s ninth season. Gay club viewing parties are yet another para-textual extension to *Drag Race*'s media circulation. Roscoe's Tavern has become something of a standard-bearer for the art of the *Drag Race* club



Bars like Roscoe's Tavern in Boystown, Chicago, play a pivotal role in the circulation of *Drag Race*

economies, with most queens depending on club appearance fees for weekly *Drag Race* watch parties.



Drag Race viewing parties are heavily advertised on social media.





Roscoe's is especially notable for its tradition of recording viewing parties and posting them on YouTube, creating another ephemeral knowledge source for fans looking to engage with the queens beyond the parameters of *Drag Race*'s strict televisual product. Lengthy videos are often dissected and discussed online, their most controversial or scandalous moments excerpted and posted around the various Reddit communities of the *Drag Race* system

viewing, with televisions mounted around the club and a small platform in the center, occupied by a host and a few special guests to discuss the episode in real-time. Roscoe's even records these viewing parties and posts them on YouTube, as more grist for the mill of *Drag Race*'s ephemeral digital knowledge sources. Despite this being the first episode of the new season, the club was already in factions—Nina Bo'Nina Brown and Sasha Velour already had sizable fan groups without either queen having said a single word prancing through the iconic pink entrance hallway. Spoilers travel fast, from Reddit to the off-line club.

Shea Couleé was the Roscoe's special guest, a local Chicago queen and season nine *Drag Race* cast member (and eventual *Drag Race All Stars 5* Champion) thrilled to finally have her moment of celebrity. In her Werk Room entrance, Couleé bursts through the pink archway in shiny turquoise stockings and a shaggy orange coat with a catchphrase ready-to-brand: "My name is Shea Couleé, and I didn't come to play, I came to slay." As she stepped across the threshold and fulfilled the iconicity and semiotic codification of many, many queens before, the club audience roared in applause and Couleé was quickly overcome by tears. The signature melodrama of the *Drag Race* time machine was made manifest: a career began, again, for the world, with unknown cost. And pre-making as a notable, and now obsolete, divergence.

RuPaul's Drag Race is a global phenomenon bringing drag to new levels of visibility. It occurs in multiple temporalities (live at Roscoe's, online on Reddit), across a variety of para-textual satellites that mold complicated affective relationships. With this visibility brings a resulting undercurrent of resistance, which we can read into the lively spoiling cultures around *Drag Race*. In a very real way, spoiler fans are reactive to a queer media culture that has already been *spoiled*—deterioration of queerness in the form of pragmatist concessions to an industrial machine. When faced with such spoilage, spoiler fans re-shuffle the rules of media knowledge, access, and timing to point to something else, the elusive queer on the horizon. The intensity of pre-*Drag Race*, post-*Drag Race* temporal division has created an affective hype that translates into creative pre-making, and an act of political potential. The spoiler fans of *RuPaul's Drag Race* illuminate the complexity of LGBTQ media publics, and the divergent viewing strategies that flow from queer ambivalence.

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| Shea Couleé's entrance into the Werk Room in <i>Drag Race</i> season nine is a symbolic entrance into <i>Drag Race</i> 's control over the queens' discursive positioning and character development. The 'spoiled' entrance acts in opposition to that system. | Shea Couleé would go on to win <i>Drag Race All Stars 5</i> , completing a journey from an overwhelmed queen crying at a bar in Chicago to a title holder in a prodigious reality television empire. |

[Go to Notes page](#)



Notes

1. Reddit is a social media website and online community made up of various sub-communities themed around different topics in pop culture and media called “subreddits” (as noted later, several subreddits are devoted to *RuPaul’s Drag Race*). Member posts are organized through community vote, all content able to be voted “up” or “down” based on user interest and approval, with the highest up-voted content appearing at the top of webpages. With no email required for registering an account, Reddit is notably accessible to casual usership (see Ovadia 2015). This quality has both enhanced Reddit’s popularity, and led to hostile cyber-bullying environments often dubbed “toxic technocultures” (Massanari 2015). According to redditinc.com at the time of this writing, Reddit has over 430 million active users each month and over 130,000 subreddit communities. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. Ironically, an early piece of scholarship on spoilers and television was on reality competition television, Henry Jenkins’ chapter on *Survivor* in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) pre-dating Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell’s work on *Lost*.
3. “Meet the Queens” refers to the introductory videos WOW releases at the start of each season.
4. Racism in the *Drag Race* fandom is a violence perpetrated by the fandom itself that the fans struggle both to stop and to atone for. More research is needed on this subject in conjunction with research broadly addressing racism in online social media spaces. For more information on racism within the *Drag Race* fandom, see GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation)’s article featured on their blog *amp* devoted to young activist voices, in the works cited (Menchavez 2020).
5. This false information was disseminated in a YouTube video that has been deleted in-between the writing of this piece and its final publication, a sign of the ephemerality of these forms of communication.
6. The drag character “Sasha Belle” is no longer performed by Jared Breakenridge, who instead goes by the new name Frisbee Jenkins. Given Sasha Belle’s role in *Drag Race*’s narrative, and the name’s use in r/SpoiledDragRace, I will continue to use it here.
7. This description of spoiling as a “queer art” pays homage to Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), conceptualizing “failure” as a form of resistance. Spoiling is its own form of failure, confounding the traditional dynamics of media literacy and spectatorship. [[return to page 2](#)]
8. Opacity as a discursive opportunity in queer art is a phenomenon explored by Nicholas de Villiers in his book *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (2012), framing opacity as “an alternative queer strategy or tactic that is not linked to an interpretation of hidden depths,

concealed meanings, or a neat opposition between silence and speech” noting heteronormativity’s frequent command of “open’ and “transparent’ communication (6).

9. A pun on “I carry a Chanel” referencing the luxury elite handbag. [[return to page 3](#)]

10. This is a quote from a YouTube video of Masters’ uploaded to her own account that quickly went viral and has since become a notable text among the fandom (Piedra 2016). [[return to page 4](#)]

11. *Untucked* takes place “behind the scenes” of the judges’ deliberation during a normal episode of *Drag Race*, as the queens discuss how they performed in the challenges. It often airs immediately following *Drag Race* proper, although for multiple seasons it has been an online-only program.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The cast of *Love Island* UK (season 4, 2018) stick to their heterosexual pairings to compete in group tasks and games.



The female hopefuls of *The Bachelor* US (season 23, 2019) must compete to win the affections of male suitor, Colton Underwood.



In a promotional photograph for *Are You the One*'s sexually fluid cast (season 8, 2019), the casual and liberating mixing of contestants in this

Are you my perfect match? Reality TV as a stage for queer identity in MTV's *Are You the One*?

by [Philippa Orme](#)

By definition, queer can never be mainstream. Queer functions in a distinctly disruptive and oppositional way, disavowing heteronormative binaries of gender and sexuality for more fluid and transgressive understandings of identity.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Queer culture and the reality dating show therefore seem made to combine in a perfect match. Compromise, lauded when discussing personal relationships, seems impossible to achieve if we are looking for a combination of television, a mainstream medium rooted in capitalist, heteronormative expressions of power, and queerness, which defines itself against these same norms.[2]

Unsurprisingly, reality TV neglects queer identities in its most notable dating programmes. Schedule staples such *Love Island* (2015-) and *The Bachelor* (2002-) are built on the strict categorisation of heterosexual men and women as they compete to form a winning couple. With contestants propelled by alluring financial incentives, these dating shows reaffirm normative identity categories in their portrayal of 'true love'. But beyond a lack of queer representation, reality TV's normativity is problematically tied to its 'low brow' status. Regularly attracting mass audiences, reality programming gets dismissed as commercial, derivative and commonplace, lacking artistic innovation that might challenge social and cultural norms.[3]

We can't dispute, however, that queer viewers of reality TV have existed and do exist. Narrow-minded assumptions of TV's absolute, innate heteronormativity risk the erasure of queer viewers. Likewise, definitions of queerness as a quintessentially resistant "token of non-assimilation" erect unworkable conceptual boundaries.[4] Preoccupations with simplistic dichotomies between 'us' and 'them', the 'queer' and the 'heterosexual', or the 'oppositional' and the 'mainstream' are often found in queer theory. But, as Nikki Sullivan maintains, these concepts are also built on strict categorisations that contradict the fluidity and transformability celebrated within lived queer identity.[5]

Other queer scholars have responded by critiquing common notions of television's inherent normativity, instead repositioning the medium as one available for queer aesthetics and experiences.[6] Nevertheless, their critical interventions do not usually take up reality TV. For example, Michael Lovelock usefully analyses how values of authenticity and celebrity have shaped our understanding of queer people. Nonetheless, he discusses reality TV predominantly as a genre that can express queer identity, rather than seek queerness within reality TV's mode of representation. My analysis of *Are You the One* (2014 to present; abbreviated here as *AYTO*) addresses this lacuna.

shot is emphasised over exclusive heterosexual pairings.

I focus on *AYTO*'s eighth season, which reinvigorates its formula with a cast that is entirely sexually and/or gender fluid. All contestants must find their 'perfect match', predetermined by the show's 'scientific' algorithm, to win a share of one million dollars. The first section of my essay assesses the programme's titular fixation with 'the one'. I discuss how its reliance on an opaque matching algorithm remains unchanged from the one used for a heteronormative audience and thus contradicts the fluid identities represented.

I then unearth some disruptions at the heart of *AYTO*'s style of documentary. Just as it prioritises genuine romantic connections formed through its 'perfect match', it simultaneously presents these relationships with a heavy reliance on staging, performance and narrativization. The construct of the courtship dating show is to set up contrasts. That is, it has rigid content that is often met with, and challenged by, rampant ambiguities, often leading viewers to question what is 'authentic' and what is 'performed'. I argue such a construct undermines the show's own normativity and is fundamentally queer. *AYTO* provides a context to unpick this underlying queerness, since the frictions its queer subjects provoke do not get diminished, but rather mirrored, facilitated and heightened by the show's performance of reality.



Terrance J (out of shot) gathers the contestants to explain the show's premise and guides them on their journey toward their 'perfect match'.

The 'perfect match' and queer identity

Set in a specially constructed villa in Hawaii, *AYTO* presents itself as a haven where, distant from the heteronormative 'real world', reality TV's queer contestants can finally be themselves. To reinforce its compatibility algorithm, the show's host, Terrance J, assures audiences that each contestant has undergone thorough background and psychological testing, which considers their upbringing, interests, dislikes and emotional sensibilities. This pre-show preparation includes investigative interviews with the contestants' friends, family members and ex-partners, compiled to create a well-rounded portrait of each individual's character. In the opening episode, encouraged by Terrance to "be yourself" and "make meaningful connections", the singletons of *AYTO* are urged to learn about the intricacies of each other's, and their own, identities to ensure that all the calculated partners are successfully understood.

Visible tensions between *AYTO*'s queer contestants and the strict 'perfect match' premise they must adhere to emerge in the second episode. Noor and Justin, following a successful date, are early to confess a mutual attraction and, after a vote, are sent to the 'truth booth' to confirm their compatibility. Disheartened, both discover they are a 'no match'. Noor says she has another romantic interest, Amber. Choosing not to say this before, Noor admits to "playing it safe"—craving the familiarity of previous heterosexual relationships. Justin hits back, "If you're not staying true to who you really are then you're wasting everybody's time".



A spark ignites between Noor and Justin as they discuss their dating history.



Noor and Amber talk about the truth booth revelation and how that impacts the future of their relationship.



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Regardless of staying ‘true’ oneself or not, it is curious that if Justin and Noor had been revealed to be a perfect match, this confessed attraction would not have mattered. Or, after uncovering her "no match" with Justin, Noor might have realised she must not have lived up to her “authentic self” and looked to Amber as a solution. Most importantly, the show entrenches the authority of its matching algorithm in validating ‘correct’ queer relationships. It does so by drawing on the (seemingly shallow) ingrained belief that uncovering these partners then necessitates their commitment to discovering their most authentic self. In doing so, *AYTO* naively suggests that its dating algorithm should and will reveal accurately something as subjective and fluid as sexual identity, as well as answer the questions we might ask ourselves about it (such as, ‘Do I prefer women to men and what does that say about me?’).

AYTO prioritises the self-revelation gained from the discovery of one’s fixed match, and the necessity of staying ‘true’ to oneself to find it. The device of the match and how it functions in the show is emblematic of what Michael Lovelock describes as reality TV’s investment in ‘compulsory authenticity’. This notion presumes that each individual has “an innate and essential ‘true’ self”, which it is their duty to “discover, manifest and be faithful to.”[7] Lovelock further argues this central narrative on reality TV has allowed certain representations of queer-identifying people to be relatively normalised.[8] The perception that LGBT+ people are born with their sexuality, or born in the wrong body, for instance, speaks to a ‘core self’ that a queer person must discover by breaking heteronormative convention and then embrace through self-acceptance. And the attention given to ‘coming out’ in popular culture, that is, the moment when queer people profess their non-conforming status to the world, is likewise mimicked by reality television’s obsession with embodying one’s ‘real’ self through acts of confession and disclosure.

However, those who embody queer forms of personhood, challenging popular understandings of sex and gender beyond its fundamental binaries, will inevitably conflict with reality TV’s overriding investment in abiding, essential selves.[9] In this show, these collisions are most striking as an infatuation develops between



Kai (left) and Jenna (right) discover they are a 'no match' in the truth booth but, against the advice of the show, continue their relationship.

contestants, Kai and Jenna. Recently transitioned, Kai expresses his newfound self-confidence to explore his sexuality more freely and professes a preference for open relationships. Jenna, on the other hand, strictly states her preference for monogamous relationships. Directly transgressing the show's instruction, both are declared a 'no match' yet continue to pursue their fragmentary and tempestuous attraction.

Their disobedience causes tensions within the group that are neutralised during group sessions with the shows' therapist, 'Dr Frankie'. She questions Kai's polygamous lifestyle and advises Jenna against pursuing toxic infatuations and longing for those not meant for her. Kai is chastised for continually resorting to casual sex and accused of not "trying hard enough" to find their perfect match. Dr Frankie pressures both to move on. The show's successful realignment of its rebellious contestants detracts from laying blame on *AYTO's* monogamous premise requiring its queer contestants to restrict their options to 'the one'. The show places blame on the contestants; by desiring someone the algorithm deemed wrong for them, Kai and Jenna's commitment to their most authentic selves is questioned.



Group discussions are essential in *AYTO*. Contestants disclose details about past abuse, previous relationships, and how they have come to accept their queer identities.



Dr Frankie often leads these group discussions as therapy sessions. With the reassurance of Dr Frankie's homosexuality, these sessions are set up as a safe and accepting place; however, her interventions also reinforce the show's perfect match.

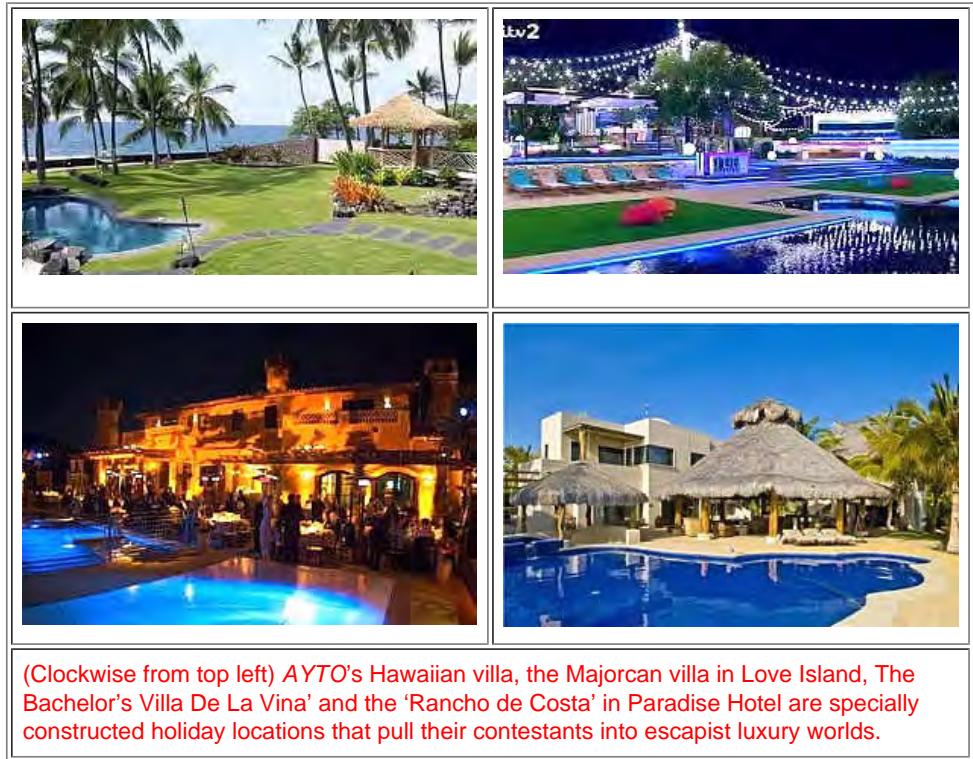
Dr Frankie's 'therapy sessions' bring to light the problems inherent in instructing queer people whom they should be with and then blaming them when they choose wrongly according to the show's own fixed logic. This logic is not only historically damaging, it also harbours assimilative discourses. As Jeffrey Bennet argues, LGBTQI+ identities are generally recast as "ontologically secured" on reality TV, that is, "queer practices are hegemonically appropriated to comfort audiences." [10] Similarly, *AYTO* ensures that individuals with disruptive sexuality and/or gender identities get pushed into subservience—subservience that must satisfy normative perceptions of queer relationships in keeping with monogamous ideals and a relative repression of sexual experimentation.

Constructing romance

In terms of narrative development, *AYTO's* presentation of these relationships

and the revelations they inspire are substantially more complex than the tight regulation of its 'perfect match'. Evolving romances are conveyed to us through a combination of observational and testimonial styles that confer a sense of process and naïve 'truth.' This happens alongside significant intervention by programme makers with their continual reliance on staging and heavy narrativization.[11] The participants' unambiguous performative disclosures consistently work towards revealing core truths (who is my perfect match?) and simultaneously revealing 'self' (who is right for me? And critically, who am I?). But at the same time *AYTO* embraces artifice when staging the development of supposedly 'real' romantic relationships.

The core setup of most reality dating shows, after all, is fundamentally paradoxical: the shows propose that 'true love' between real people can and will be found in entirely unreal situations.[12] With the show often taking place in a specially constructed house or wilderness, individuals are transported to an entirely unfamiliar environment over which they have little control.[13] This is reflective of *AYTO*'s holiday villa in Hawaii, and *Love Island*'s Majorcan villa, *The Bachelor*'s 'Villa De La Vina' and *Paradise Hotel*'s (2003-2019) 'Rancho de Costa' in Mexico. Such settings are manufactured with the specific intention of encouraging romantic interactions, often including shared bedrooms and private dating locations which are contrasted to communal and ceremonial spaces. A television host frequently oversees these staged environments, serving enthusiastically to reinforce the value of the show's premise, host dramatic result nights, and actively direct the contestants in their pursuit of love.



As Christopher Grobe outlines, reality TV's openness when confronting viewers with its own conceits suggests that its many confessions are "both theatrical posturing and authentic behaviour, laboured performance and effortless being, styled rhetoric and artless talk".[14] Performance takes place on a spectrum—at one end the spontaneous and impulsive behaviour of individuals observed by a hidden camera, and on the other, individuals consciously exhibiting and enacting roles for the camera that are distinct from their real identities.[15]

Without disputing the reality of their (often) heteronormative values, I argue the reality dating shows harbour a subversive form of documentary—with a fluidity in

their construction of relationships—that lets viewers see discontinuities which run rampant within queer contexts. Queer identity possesses a disorganisation and disaggregation that disrupts the regulation of heterosexual coherence: sexuality and gender may not directly follow from sex, or rigidly reflect one another, but rather are free-floating and transgressive of boundaries.[16] The oscillations between authenticity and performance—essential to how reality dating shows understand people’s identities, their sexualities and attractions to each other—echoes this disturbance essential to queerness.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Basit and Jonathan



Basit and Jonathan are *AYTO*'s most important pairing. Both have the most developed narrative arc, and their successful partnership legitimises the matching algorithm.



In Basit's first direct address to the camera, they powerfully describe their gender identity as 'fluid'.



We are shown shots of Basit applying makeup as they talk about gender expression.

The following sections address reality TV's continuous play between authenticity and staged reality in more detail, as seen in *AYTO*. I investigate how the intimate disclosures of queer people are positioned within this interplay through a microscopic look at contestants Basit and Jonathan. I then explore how the fundamental fluidity in *AYTO*'s construction of this one evolving relationship profoundly diverges from its own rigid regulation of the normative 'perfect match'. Instead, the narrative trajectory exposes the challenges its queer contestants pose to the show's strict imposition of an idea about 'the one'.

For the first time in the show's history, Basit and Jonathan are announced as an official 'perfect match' to viewers before being confirmed as such for the contestants themselves. This relationship serves to reinforce the revelatory value of finding the 'perfect match', the discovery of one's 'authentic' self that this confirmation supposedly offers, and—as a result—the authoritative status of the matching algorithm itself.

From their initial introductions, Basit and Jonathan appear to be unlikely partners. *AYTO*'s first episode introduces the contestants. In addition to covering their initial entrance into the house, an additional short interview segment provides a brief overview of each contestant's sexuality and gender identity, both covered in their own words and with a supplementary textual description on screen. Basit struts into the house, arms spread out wide with an enthusiastic "Hi!" as they hug and kiss cast members. In an interview segment, Basit describes themselves as pansexual queer person of colour, and leans closer to the camera to define their gender—in a soft whisper—as "fluid". Basit expresses a love of colourful make-up, bohemian clothing and extravagant makeup. Concluding with a powerful statement, Basit professes "Am I a boy, or a girl? Yes, no, both and neither."

From the outset, Basit's gender fluidity appears incompatible with Jonathan who, although identifying as bisexual, exclusively emphasises his desire for more muscular, burly and rugged looking men—and in his words—those who appear more archetypally 'masculine'. In reaction to Basit's confessed interest, this is a preference that Jonathan repeatedly falls back on to dismiss any possibility of a mutual attraction. Basit is even treated rather cruelly. Jonathan rudely rejects Basit's feminine appearance, and in particular Basit's make-up, stating his liking for more "clean" and "polished" looking men—and he also shows a lack of caring in using any correct pronouns.



In Jonathan's first address to the camera, he describes himself as cisgender and



Basit and Jonathan meet for the first time. While Basit appears interested and

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| bisexual. Jonathan also professes a lack of self-confidence, which he wishes to work on throughout the show. | engaged, Jonathan is much more dismissive of their attention. |



Queer prom is portrayed as an exciting and liberating event for its contestants to celebrate their transgressive identities.



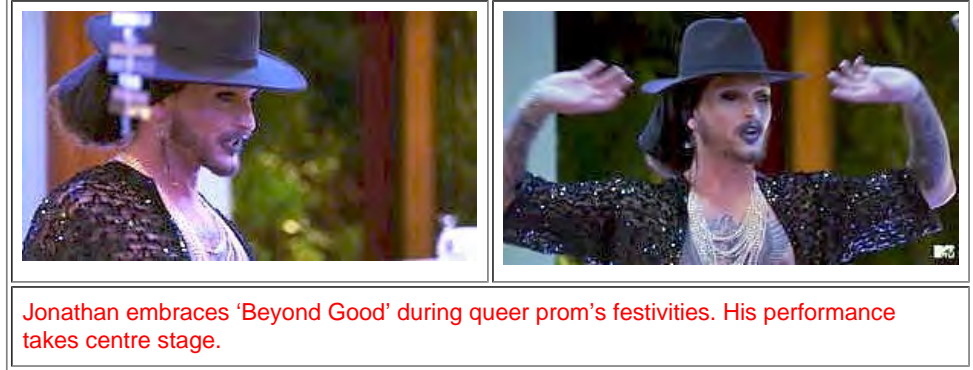
However, *AYTO*'s fourth episode, 'We Come to Slay', is framed as the pivotal turning point for both Jonathan's attitude towards gender fluidity and his relationship with Basit. The producers inform the contestants that they will stage a queer prom event, intended to compensate for the heteronormative constraints and gender binaries of most prom nights where LGBT+ individuals are typically unable to 'go as themselves'. In preparation, the contestants paint "equality" and "queer" on colourful banners and decorate the house in rainbow flags and lights. At the grand reveal of the queer prom's completed setting, colourful spotlights glide and flash across the screen. To the backing of an electronic pop soundtrack, the contestants are filmed in slow motion as they strut into the garden. The beats of the music are edited to coincide with the beats of their strides, the bass thumping as their feet hit the ground. The prom attendees begin to dance and kiss each other as the camera expressively zooms in and out and speeds up and down. Shot in this playful sensational style, queer prom is portrayed as a high-energy (albeit contrived) celebration of queer culture.

AYTO's ability to offer a 'safe space', from the construction of its 'inclusive' Hawaiian villa to its more pointed staging of queer prom, speaks to essential values for queer communities. Gay bars and clubs provide cultural hubs for queer people to gather away from toxic or prejudicial environments, where they are more able to 'be themselves' within more accepting and communal settings. José Esteban Muñoz argues the necessity of "world making" in queer cultural production gestures to the comparative "lack that is endemic to any heteronormative rendering of the world".[17] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) A repeated narrative that arises throughout *AYTO* comes from the perspectives of contestants who, accustomed to more socially conservative environments, now face a new challenge where queerness is not only presented as a new norm—but is something they must actively celebrate and perform. The nature of reality TV in overtly constructing its spaces to stimulate such performances, as *AYTO* creates a safe space for its cast to find their 'true' selves, not only signals comparative lack in heteronormative worlds but also openly references the intervention necessary in encouraging, or enforcing, the performance of sexuality and gender identity—transgressive or normative.

Problematically, *AYTO*'s queer prom creates its central declaration of heteronormative transgression by having its guests dress as their 'opposite sex'. Basit enthusiastically introduces us to Dionne Slay. Jonathan, with eager support from Basit, debuts his new "feminine side", Beyond Good. *AYTO* portrays this act of gender performance as a productive space that builds Jonathan's self-confidence and encourages him to challenge his pre-conceived notions of attractive masculinity. A revelatory gender performance enacted by essentially countering one's biological sex, however, is a constrained and restrictive way to upend the norm. Indeed, queerness understands gender, and the way we identify with it, as able to transgress boundaries between alleged 'femininity' and

In a dramatic, long-awaited, entrance – Dionne Slay attends queer prom.

‘masculinity’ as it is performed throughout our bodies.[18] So how rewarding can the *AYTO*’s approach to expressing gender—in working within such basic opposites as masculinity vs. femininity— really be for Basit, who is genderfluid, or others, such as Kai, who is both transgender and androgynous?



These discontinuities within queer identity actively debunk the ways universal heterosexuality gets maintained through artificial and binary identity categories. Thus, queerness inevitably conflicts with *AYTO*’s equally normative conception of gender expression.[19] At the same time, by manufacturing a queer prom event, *AYTO* offers a context where the development of meaningful relationships, and the understanding of one’s gender identity to pursue these connections, can only be achieved in the midst of, or directly as a result of, the overtly contrived plotting of a show.[20] In doing so, the reality dating show does not try to convince us that the ways we express our sexualities and gender identities possess an inner and authoritative ‘truth’ like the trappings of universal heterosexuality might. Echoing the discontinuities essential to queer identity, *AYTO* sets up a stage for the expression of identity that understands these categories as potentially authentic but fundamentally performative, explicitly part of regimes which ensure gender construction and regulation.[21]

Following the events of queer prom, Basit and Jonathan escape the excitement of the party. The pair sit together and discuss their shared time as Dionne Slay and Beyond Good. The conversation is filmed in medium framing using a handheld camera, which gently shifts and moves as it captures and ‘follows’ their discussion. Reflective of observational documentaries, such indications of the camera’s presence in the world it films suggest a fixed engagement with the immediate, intimate, and personal.[22]

Jonathan expresses that by embracing his feminine side in ‘becoming’ Beyond Good, he has now gained a personal and more meaningful understanding of Basit’s gender fluidity. He also opens himself up for the possibility of a romantic connection between the two, disclosing that his previous opinions on what he finds attractive in potential partners have now changed. This scene, paired with minimal editing which keeps to longer takes (av. 6-10 seconds), only cutting when the two reply to each other, appears unobtrusive, even invisible, and suggests a familiarity to what an actual observer might experience. Moreover, these unmediated methods emphasise the appearance of ‘free-talk’: a flow of seemingly unscripted and uninterrupted disclosures with the impression of spontaneous, everyday conversation.[23] The observational style that captures their exchange suggests a voyeuristic witnessing of a meaningful and poignant development that has simply and casually happened and would have similarly done so without the presence of the camera.

Yet, reflective of reality TV’s uniquely hybrid nature, *AYTO* blends the impression of unmediated reality associated with observational documentaries, with structural and narrative elements of the soap-opera.[24] The show’s portrayal of

Basit and Jonathan's relationship is equally staged and constructed to push a narrative of growth, discovery and revelation—and specifically one which has come about due to the show's manufacturing of its queer prom event and gender performances.

In addition to editing for spatial and temporal continuity, throughout Basit and Jonathan's conversation, shots zoom in and linger on significant facial expressions, such as smiling and gazing, that signify a sense of growing connection between the two and the meaningfulness of their discussion. Editing in reality TV does not always intend to simulate unmediated reality, but, as incorporated from the serialisation of soap operas, also works to forward a strong and convincing narrative.[25] The structuring of this scene and timeline of these scenes is also significant. It is unclear exactly when this conversation took place, but it occurs onscreen near the end of the episode after the peak of the party. This conveys a distinct narrative arc in that Basit and Jonathan discuss the experience of sharing the night as Beyond Good and Dionne Slay together, and they elaborate on their changing personal opinions and internal growth in ways that appear directly causal to queer prom and its *anagnorisis* for Jonathan. And without relying on speculation, the frequency with which reality TV's disclosures are staged entails a likelihood that Basit and Jonathan were explicitly produced and instructed to have this dialogue to openly discuss these issues in this essential revelatory moment.



Basit and Jonathan, over-joyed, disclose their blossoming connection in *AYTO*'s confessional room.

The confirmation of this progression is once again narratively reinforced through Jonathan and Basit's disclosure in the confessional room. The pair visit to confirm their gender performance at queer prom as a positive step forward for their relationship. A space where contestants can privately confess their feelings in a direct-address to the camera, the intimate and immediate engagement of these confessions, and the unscripted appearance of its supposedly unscripted disclosures, reflects the impression of unfiltered feeling.[26] This confessional voice on reality TV, however, is structurally encouraged to provoke emotive responses.[27] The manufactured setup is designed for the purgation of seemingly authentic emotions, and contestants know about its function and choose, or are even urged, to partake and 'confess'.



Basit is delighted to receive Jonathan's flower-crown. Officially Jonathan's 'queen', the pair are confirmed to the audience as a 'perfect match'.

This evolution culminates in a pivotal scene half-way through the season, as Basit and Jonathan are confirmed to the audience as a perfect match. The pair go out into the garden together and Jonathan makes a flower crown for Basit as a symbol of love and acceptance. His floral courting is successful: they kiss for the first time as bright text appears onscreen excitedly informing the audience: 'Basit and Jonathan are a perfect match!' In all of its seasons, this is the first time a couple have been confirmed exclusively for the audience, before the contestants are informed themselves. Thus, it is evident *AYTO* is explicitly seeking to prove the legitimacy of its premise.

The dramatic reversal in the fortunes of their relationship reinforces the authority of *AYTO*'s algorithm and the initial superficiality of Jonathan's misguided feelings. But above and beyond, it tells us that although Basit and Jonathan are authentically meant for each other—for them to come to this realisation overt performative revelations of the self are equally essential: from the events of queer prom, the observed and narrativized moments of revelation, to the disclosures in the confessional room. *AYTO*'s understanding of Jonathan and Basit's developing relationship—rather than it happening as a solely organic occurrence—necessitates a fluid combination of supposedly authentic revelation, alongside significant intervention and performance.

A convincing queer statement?

Undoubtedly, a problem arises when the perfect match is used to legitimise queer relationships. The need to emphasise an essential truth invested in the revelation of the correct partner holds unwavering authority throughout *AYTO*. While the process is depicted as rewarding and having personal revelatory value, its unyielding nature entirely contradicts what makes the term 'queer' fluid, transgressive and disruptive.

This dynamic manifests itself problematically throughout Basit and Jonathan's relationship. Jonathan as the more normative and privileged subject takes centre stage in his ability to benefit and grow from Basit's non-conforming status. Basit, a queer person of colour, is consistently framed as a 'non-conforming' minority compared to Jonathan. Their gender fluidity is at first met with abhorrence and cruelty, then later becomes a source of education and enrichment. Jonathan supposedly learns from his gender performance, gains personal experience, is taught the correct pronouns and can therefore 'understand' Basit—which understanding also suggests Basit needed to be understood in order for their relationship to be validated. And due to the legitimisation of the perfect match as an essential source of revelation, this narrative is not only validated as okay but is also deemed aspirational.

At the same time, *AYTO*'s construction of this relationship does little to convince us that each contestant will—of their own volition—discover and confess something truly genuine about their 'true' selves by finding their compatible partners—or that they would have done so without the governance that the show imposes. From the manufacturing of queer prom to the expository function of the confessional room, contestants must unambiguously perform authenticity within overtly staged environments. Essential moments of authentic revelation are observed, yet also structured and edited to convey a narrative of self-discovery. Such instances don't necessarily testify an opposition to authenticity, but rather underscore how reality TV's performative confessions openly gesture towards the camera's presence and the overtly constructed premise that surrounds their disclosures. *AYTO* confronts us with the notion that Jonathan and Basit's revelations may be possibly genuine but must simultaneously be products of deliberate staging and artifice.



Kylie (left) and Kari (right) enter the truth booth. Bright light beams scan over their bodies as their true compatibility is calculated.



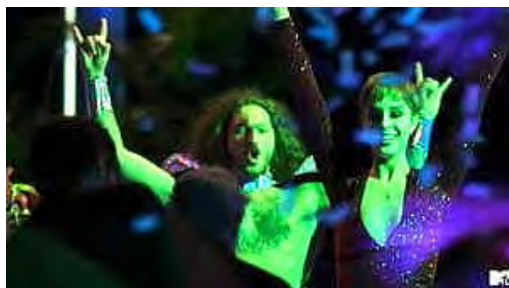
Using a print of their hands, all pairings are locked in. The singletons of *AYTO* anxiously wait to find out the results.

A useful example to explain this integral disruption in *AYTO* is the final revelation of the perfect matches themselves in the truth booth and light ceremonies. Voted in by the rest of the cast each week, two contestants enter the pod to face a screen that displays a picture of their faces. The text 'calculating' appears as blue light beams begin to 'scan' their bodies and, after a lengthy pause, the anticipated result is revealed. Emblematic of reality TV's essential meeting of artificiality with the production of authenticity, this performative reveal is entirely unnecessary for solely discovering the algorithm's results—the contestants could rather just be told this information. Nonetheless, theatrical emphasis is enacted to stress the importance of the 'perfect match' as a central revelation. And the attention given to the sensational scanning of their figures communicates an emphasis on the body as harbouring an essential 'truth'.

Similarly, in the light ceremony, which is a weekly event where contestants choose to officially pair up and find out how many perfect matches are amongst the group (though unrevealed as to precisely who), couples must also 'scan' their hands together onto a screen to 'lock in' as a match. The body again is a visual metaphor for the essential core revelation as emanating from inside one's true self and emerging from the eventual discovery of the 'perfect match'.



Large bright beams (one per match) light up *AYTO*'s stage to signify how many correct partnerships the cast have uncovered.



The cast of *AYTO* are delighted to discover, just in time for the show's dramatic finale, that they have uncovered all the perfect matches.

The pivotal sensationalism and overt performativity here exists with and contradicts any innate 'truth' associated with both these essential reveals. This kind of rupture is mirrored to a lesser, but more complex, degree in the depiction of Jonathan and Basit's relationship. We can see how authenticity works on a sliding scale on the reality TV, operating within, rather than opposed to contrivance, melodrama and performance.[28] As queer contestants expose the flaws in *AYTO*'s investment in rigid pairings, the inherent divide between reality and artifice in how *AYTO* presents the development of its relationships deeply conflicts with the neat, linear and normative terms laid out by its perfect match premise. Whatever 'truth' is garnered from the discovery of its perfect match remains intrinsically ambiguous and elusive.

Conclusion

By the show's finale, all the contestants successfully find perfect matches. This victory is celebrated by the cast as a powerful queer 'statement'—that an LGBT+ cast, like the 'straight' ones that came before them, can uncover all the 'correct' partners. *Are You the One?* promises 'love without limits'. It conversely delivers a restricted vision of queer identity that is liberated and authentic only so far as its format allows. What kind of 'impactful' statement for queer people that comes from this conclusion is unclear and unconvincing.

I challenge how hard *AYTO* is trying to convince us of an innate 'truth' that its perfect match possesses. The privileging of an authentic self, made visible through observational and testimonial styles, is equally wrought through the artifice of narration, performance, staging and obstruction. The reality dating show frequently upholds heteronormative values in its portrayal of onscreen relationships; however, I ask, how often are we made to buy into the love such programmes are selling?

Tensions between rigidity and fluidity are not only reflected in *AYTO*'s constrained vision of authenticity and the queer individuals it seeks to validate, but are also demonstrative of the hybrid form of the dating show's format itself. Akin to Basit's description of their gender fluidity, "Am I a boy? Yes, no, both, neither", reality TV is simultaneously truth, fiction, both and neither. It is increasingly hard to distinguish authenticity from performance—where it begins, or where it might end—both states are free-floating and indistinguishable. In *AYTO*, these processes don't subdue the challenges queer casts pose to its normative content, but it works with them, informs, and exposes these rebellions. The neatness and security within the matches are equally undermined by the allusivity and fluidity in the dating show's performance of reality.

It is crucial to tackle the critical biases that have caused reality TV's neglect and instead recognise its potential—beyond its function to 'represent' queer people—as a documentary form that equally holds the complexity for queer identity. This way, we can more fully comprehend how reality TV works, and locate the ways it understands and acknowledges queer identities, and—as a result—better determine what these representations mean for queer people.

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Notes

1. Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), p. 43-4; see also, David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction: What's Queer about Queer Studies now?" *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4, (December 2005), p. 1, [https://read.dukeupress.edu/social-text/article/23/3-4%20\(84-85\)/1/32709/Introduction](https://read.dukeupress.edu/social-text/article/23/3-4%20(84-85)/1/32709/Introduction). [return to page 1]
2. Lynne Joyrich, "Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2, (2014), p. 133, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/535712>.
3. Susan Murray address these cultural currencies in "I Think We Need a New Name for It' The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV," 40-56, in *Reality TV Remaking Television Culture*, eds, Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004).
4. Alan McKee, "Resistance is hopeless': assimilating queer theory", *Social Semiotics* 9, no. 2 (August, 1999), p. 235-5; quoted in Sullivan, *Queer Theory*, p. 48.
5. Sullivan, *Queer Theory*, p. 48.
6. The recognition of previously overlooked queer sexualities and gender identities in U.S. sitcoms of the 1960s and 70s (Miller, 2019); studies of TV's anti-normative and disruptive temporalities present within the non-linear 'reversing' and 'rewinding' of time in broadcast schedules and serialised drama (Needham, 2009; Villarejo, 2013); the understanding of queerness through the moving body in fictional storytelling (Shacklock, 2019); to the conception of TV's 'closet-as-screen', being both a projection surface and filtering device, where some forms of queer visibility are projected and others are filtered out (Kohren, 2015), are some key examples of scholarship that locates queerness within the properties and histories of the medium itself.
7. Michael Lovelock, *Reality TV and Queer Identities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 4.
8. Ibid., p. 18.
9. Ibid., p. 87.
10. Jeffrey Bennet, "In Defence of Gaydar: Reality Television and the Politics of the Glance," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 5 (2006), p. 415, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07393180601046154>.
11. Jelle Mast, "Documentary at Crossroads: Reality TV and the Hybridization of Small-Screen Documentary," *Sociology Compass* 3, no. 6 (2009): p. 888, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00242.x>.

12. Aslama and Pantti, "Talking Alone: Reality TV, emotions and authenticity." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2006), p. 170, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1367549406063162>.
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16. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversions of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990), p. 135-6.
17. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising utopia: the then and there of queer futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 118. [[return to page 2](#)]
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19. Sullivan, *Queer Theory*, p. 39.
20. Aslama and Pantti, "Talking alone," p. 170.
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22. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 41-43.
23. Minna and Pantti, "Talking alone," p. 179.
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25. Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, p. 128-9.
26. Minna and Pantti, "Talking alone," p. 170.
27. Mimi White, *Tele-advising: Therapeutic discourse in American television* (UNC Press Books, 1992), p. 181-2.
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Hee-chul reassures Sol-bin that she won't be scandalized for partnering with him in class.



Sol-bin jokingly asks if Hee-chul is gay.



So-min asks Kyung-hoon what the black dots on the cups are and Kyung-hoon responds that they are eyes that will watch her at all times.

Queer politics of Korean variety TV: state, industry & genre

by [Grace Jung](#)

On September 3, 2016, the popular South Korean (hereafter “Korean”) variety program *Ask Us Anything* (2015—) on cable network JoongAng Tongyang Broadcasting Corporation (JTBC) aired an episode featuring singer Ahn Sol-bin of the Korean pop (K-pop) girl group LABOUM.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Early in the episode, one of the program’s regular cast members Kim Hee-chul (of boyband Super Junior) invites Ahn to come sit beside him saying,

“Sol-bin. Even if you date me, you won’t be involved in any scandals so don’t worry. Really.”

To this, Ahn immediately responds,

“Why? Are you gay?”

Kim and the cast members all react to Ahn’s comment with laughter over the canned laugh track that sets off in the background. Three months later, the Korea Communications Commission (KCC) issued a disciplinary action against *Ask Us Anything*’s program runners citing this remark to be problematic as it might be offensive to the “sexual minority” (söngsосуja)—the LGBTQIA+ group in Korea. Alongside this, the KCC also condemned the program’s frequent objectification of women’s bodies, citing the episode in which cast member Min Kyung-hoon made a bra out of paper cups and gifted it to actress Jun So-min.

The KCC is a state administration that is responsible for producing and regulating all television-related policies including censorship clauses, and it is comparable to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the US. KCC representative Ha Nam Shin states,

“[*Ask Us Anything*] is a variety program which is comedic in nature but it also enjoys a level of popularity that rivals non-cable programs. This means that the show also must maintain a level of class that reflects its popularity and we decided to issue a warning on this ground.”[2]

In the same report is a record that thirty-seven viewers wrote in complaints against the show to the KCC, although details of these complaints were not published.

In this article, I investigate the KCC’s disciplinary action against *Ask Us Anything* based on claims of homophobia and sexism, which construct a state concern for the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community and women. The state and industry, however, prevent fair and equal treatment of queer and female identities on and off screen through moments of homophobia, sexism, and emphasis on



Hee-chul dresses up as a girl named "Hee-mi" and pairs up with Ho-dong in an improvised and gamified sketch.



Figure 6. "Hee-mi" played by Hee-chul gives Ho-dong a kiss on the cheek.



Kyung-soo and Tae-sub in the TV drama *Life is Beautiful*.

heteronormative ideals. While the two particular incidents that the KCC cite lack sufficient textual evidence of homophobia or sexism, *Ask Us Anything* does air homophobic and misogynistic content that state censors regularly overlook, demonstrating the KCC's inconsistent political concerns for the rights of marginalized identities in the Republic of Korea (ROK). While a gay celebrity like Hong Seok-cheon makes an appearance on the show, the program reduces his appearance to a state of homonormativity by making his value and return to television conditional upon his economic contribution to the nation as an entrepreneur and not recognizing his inherent human value as a person who happens to be a gay man.

The genre of Korean variety TV and figures like Kim Hee-chul, however, transgress conservative rationales on television through queer/camp visuals and queer stardom. In addition, the female comedians who make guest appearances on *Ask Us Anything* also bring an element of trans gender queering to the screen by disrupting the straight cis-male cast members' masculinity, male gaze and male appetite for sexually desirable femininity. I argue that while the instances that the KCC cite as homophobic and sexist are not so violating to LGBTQIA+ members and women, the show still violates the rights of these identities in other ways. At the same time, the show exhibits queerly liberatory moments as well.

While reading *Ask Us Anything* through a queer lens, I bring attention to the "queer politics" of Korean variety television by using a method similar to one that political scientist Samuel Chambers applies.[3] I analyze state laws, the industry, and episodes of *Ask Us Anything* for evidence of state and industry intolerance of queer identities. I also look at how the show transgresses the very acts of queer suppression and homophobia by exhibiting high camp elements and startexts while also maintaining a highly hegemonic-masculinist logic in practice within the TV industry through hierarchies and relations that oppress or exclude women.[4] The discriminatory practices against women and queer identities expose how hegemonic masculinity affects both groups in the television industry specifically and in Korean society more broadly. With that said, *Ask Us Anything* also contributes to progressive queer television viewing through frequent gender bending and trans gender queer subjectivity.

There is a dearth of queer Korean TV studies in the fields of Cinema and Media, Gender and Sexuality, and East Asian studies. Historian Todd Henry's essay "Queer/Korean Studies as Critique" comments on the systemized discrimination against and suppression of not only queer civilians in the ROK but also of the scholars who seek to publish on queerness thus "relegat[ing] scholarship on LGBTQI Koreans to a position of negativity and neglect." [5] In fact, during the research for this article, I had trouble finding academic publications on queer critical Korean television studies; an article on the Korean drama *Life is Beautiful* (SBS, 2010) and gay representation is an outlier.[6] What articles I did find on contemporary queer Korean media were few and far in between, and topics were mostly limited to cinema, fashion, and K-pop. This project aims to fill a gap and expand the discourse in the area of queer Korean television studies with a focus on variety content.

Anti-queer politics in Korean broad/narrowcasting



Soo-yeon and Eun-bin share a kiss in the TV drama *Schoolgirl Detectives*.

Queer Korean identities are not outlawed or completely erased in Korean broadcast and cable television. Within domestic politics, however, the state makes little effort to enforce policies that prevent discrimination of LGBTQIA+ citizens. Following the impeachment and arrest of former President Park Geun-hye in late 2016, President Moon Jae-in was elected. During his presidential campaign, he publicly announced that he opposed gay marriage and homosexuality in the military. Moon claimed that one's sexual orientation is a "private matter"—an expression that forces queer people into the closet and prevents them from living freely and openly in society.

In the JTBC serialized TV drama *Schoolgirl Detectives* (2014-2015), a kiss scene between two high school girls led to a warning citation from the KCC to the producers of the show because of the content's "harmful influence on Korea's youth." [7] Homosexuality is not illegal in Korea, but laws like the Juvenile Protection Act (also known as the Youth Protection Act) which went into effect in 1997 masquerade as a form of government protection of youth while repressing queer identities. In 2001, the law was amended to prohibit the distribution of any homosexual material or content related to incest, bestiality and sado-masochism. [8] Distribution, according to the act, includes the sale of audio-visual media and broadcasting. This law not only equates homosexuality with harm to youth but also legitimizes the exclusion of queer subjects on television. In April 2003, after years of activism by Korean LGBTQIA+ groups, "homosexuality" was removed from the list of "obscenity and perversion." [9] Despite this, in 2015, it was reported that Samsung, along with Google, banned a popular app for social networking within the queer community called Hornet.

Samsung, which owns the newspaper *JoongAng*, is also affiliated with the cable network JTBC where *Ask Us Anything* airs. The KCC's Broadcasting Act allowed *chaebol* [10] groups to own up to 33% of cable operations and to produce, program and air their own entertainment. [11] A representative of the company explained in a memo to Hornet dated January 1, 2013 that the app was not approved for Samsung Galaxy phones and tablets:

"[D]ue to the local moral values or laws, content containing LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi sexual, Transgender) is not allowed in the following countries...." [12]

The list includes 34 countries including Korea and the US, as well as nations with socially progressive gender and sexuality politics such as Sweden, Iceland, Denmark and Norway. The report also states that images found in the app are "not appropriate for young users" such as teens and children. [13] This remark stems from Samsung's assumption that an LGBTQIA+ identity is necessarily sexual and immoral. It also contains the discriminatory stereotype that conflates homosexuality with pedophilia. Samsung's report which includes this conflation parallels the language used by the KCC in the Broadcasting Act. While queerness is not illegal in Korea, queer discrimination is systemically present in both state and commercial institutions.

The KCC's Broadcasting Act applies to all broadcast and narrowcast programs. Throughout the document, there is a consistent discouragement of "lewdness" or anything that would disrupt "a sound family life and on [the] guidance of children and juveniles." [14] The Broadcasting Act also condemns discrimination according

to “sex, age, occupation, religion, belief, class, region, race, etc.”:

“A broadcast shall strive to faithfully reflect the interests of the groups or classes that are relatively small in number or at a disadvantage in realization of the pursuit of their interests.”[15]

Whereas identity-based discrimination is condemned, there is no explicit language that protects LGBTQIA+ rights in this act. Rather, by upholding family wholesomeness and values, emphasizing the protection of youth, and stressing overall “public morals and social ethics,” the Broadcasting Act demonstrates its bias for the heteronormative family structure. The state’s protectiveness of the “sound family life,” children, as well as public morals is motivated by sexist and homophobic underpinnings, as demonstrated by the Juvenile Protection Act.[16]

The irony is that despite the state’s emphasis on the family life, Korea has many single people. The number of heterosexual marriages is low while divorce rates are high. The number of births is also at a low, which produces a great deal of government anxiety given the high number of senior citizens and a concern over welfare.[17] Because there are so many singles living in Korea, same-sex cohabitation among heterosexuals is quite common, and homosexual cohabitation can easily pass for straight.[18] As mentioned earlier, being gay, lesbian or bisexual is not illegal in Korea. Being transgender is also not barred by law; it is legal to change one’s gender status in government records, public files, and national registration identification card (chumin tŭngnokjŭng) albeit with a great number of bureaucratic challenges.[19]



Transgender staff sergeant Byun Hui-su.

Queer policing takes place in certain spaces and events set aside for gendered nation-state duties. According to the Constitutional Court of Korea, Article 92 of the Military Criminal Law considers homosexual behavior (2008Hun-Ga21) in the military punishable by law. Article 92 stipulates that anal sex or sexual acts between service men may be punishable for up to two years in prison. Because of this law, in 2017, over 30 men were arrested and charged with 2008Hun-Ga21. [20] Laws such as these demonstrate the legal consequences of being gay in Korea, where conscription to the military is mandatory for every able-bodied cis-man in the country. Although the military does not turn away gay conscripts, the law does not tolerate gay intimacy during service. [21] In addition, in January 2020, transgender sergeant Byun Hui-su was discharged by the Korean military citing “physical or mental disabilities” as a provision to discharge military personnel, equating Byun’s gender-reassignment surgery as a disability, and barring her from serving despite her desire and commitment to her military duty and national security. Such examples demonstrate the suffering that queer individuals endure in Korea due to the nation’s homophobia and transphobia.

The ROK’s military discrimination against queer citizens is an example of Eve Sedgwick’s concept of “homosexual panic”—a type of homophobia that transpires in a homosocial environment wherein both the self and others are suspected of being gay and therefore feared. [22] Homophobia is amplified in homosocial conditions because the potential for homosexual desire is heightened. I add that not only does the Korean state induce homosexual panic through law but legitimizes said panic with the state’s concerns over the country’s low birth rate. All men in the ROK are required to serve in the military for up to two years—a gendered state obligation required by law for men to be socially recognized as men. [23]

Upon completing this task, the next step is for men to fulfill their state duties as breadwinners by participating in the economy and as fathers through marriage and procreation with a woman. Thus, homosexual panic, when coupled with the nation’s panic over the population crisis, makes homosexuality appear like a betrayal of the state, and makes women’s bodies seem valued solely for procreation. The nation’s heavy emphasis on hetero-normative familialism, or what John (Songpae) Cho calls “Confucian biopolitics,” “inhibits the expression of homosexuality, except in highly discreet ways....” [24] Confucian biopolitics prioritizes the heteronormative family and the nation-state over individual independence; the individual is expected to conform to specific social prescriptions as a collective—the “family governmentality.” [25]

In her monograph on single women and the housing market in Korea, cultural anthropologist Jeessook Song details how lesbians remain closeted for fear of facing job discrimination and abandonment by their families. All unmarried women—lesbian or straight—who choose to live apart from their families are infantilized and othered by their community: “[Unmarried women] are treated as children or disabled people and their sexual security is threatened.” [26] The treatment of single women as disabled echoes the treatment of Sergeant Byun’s transness as a disability making someone unfit to serve. Misogyny and transphobia in such contexts morph into ableist discrimination. Song describes one woman’s experience at a social gathering where she was told by married men that “‘children should go home’ because they ‘shouldn’t interfere with...adult business.’” [27] Song observes a parallel between the single woman’s issue with the queer issue because both identities fall outside of Korea’s social order of heteronormativity. This order is, in part, conditioned by patriarchal rationalizations that all women should be married to men, and it labels those who do not as “immature.”

The misogynistic idea of the single woman's immaturity is tied to the assumption that all single women are virgin and not sexually awakened through intercourse with a man, specifically a husband. The possibility that the woman might have engaged in pre-marital sex with someone regardless of their gender or sexual orientation prior to meeting her husband simply isn't an option. Just as female bodies are treated purely as an apparatus of procreation within the confines of marriage to a man, homosexuality is not viewed as an option in this hegemonic masculinist conception of "normal" lives and relationships. This assumption ignores accounts documented in memoirs and short stories of lesbian relationships among school girls in colonial Korea, which were long trivialized and dismissed by scholars due to their ephemeral and transient quality during the girls' "transitional phase" of adolescence.[28]

It also erases the documented homoerotic stories between women aimed predominantly at male readers for entertainment purposes in newspaper weeklies. These stories combined "investigative journalism and the playful invention of fictional storytelling" to produce "cautionary tales" in 1950s-1970s ROK's Cold War era. In fact, their purpose was to allow male readers to "imagine themselves as more thoroughly embodying idealized notions of (re)productivity and patriotism, thus allowing them to assume a position of domination in relation to their 'deviant' female compatriots." [29] The conjoining of homophobia and misogyny legitimizes hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, while the queerness of the variety genre creates moments of queer potential on Korean television.

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The queerness of the Korean variety show called *yenŭng*

Korean variety shows are referred to as *yenŭng*—a genre of entertainment broadly composed of classic variety show elements such as musical performances, sketch comedy, talk show banter, and ad-lib, as well as reality TV, and quiz/game shows. [30] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Comedy is the foundation of all *yenŭng* programs and with it comes great possibility for destabilizing constructed identities. Gender-mixing, bending and crossing occur regularly on these shows as they did in American TV like *The Texaco Star Theatre* (1948-1956, NBC) with Milton Berle.



The men of *Ask Us Anything* dress up as famous women and female characters for improv scenes such as the Little Mermaid, Nip Siu-sin, Marilyn Monroe and Mona Lisa.

As Alexander Doty notes, queer readings “result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along.” [31] Stylistically, formally and aesthetically, *yenŭng* differs from standard U.S. and British reality shows in that *yenŭng* has laugh tracks, CGI, sound effects, and subtitles to enhance emotional and comedic impact. [32] The shows imitate studio recordings before a live audience but without an audience. In this way, *yenŭng* emulates live performances’ theatricality that is in line with the tradition of vaudeville and variety shows that are staged and filmed before a live audience. Korean *yenŭng* programs are conscious of the live audience watching at home as well as the state censors (the KCC) who approve or disapprove of certain images, actions and language for television. More than in narrative content, *yenŭng* exhibits its queerness through a camp aesthetics of excess and artifice. That is, Korean variety programs have an excess of effects both sound and visual, e.g., CGI, slow motion, repetitive replays of significant moments, subtitles in bold texts, canned laugh tracks and music. In addition, the programs contain multitudes of intertextual meanings. For example, they consistently point to recognizable media from the local and global (typically from Hollywood) zeitgeist including film, TV shows, celebrities, newspaper headlines, etc.. Although Korean variety shows do not incorporate obvious

qualities that would at first-glance be recognized as queer, the genre works as a queer text through its consistent homosocial casting, cross-dressing, cross-gender play, and by recurrently featuring women who do not conform to the heteronormative conventions of desirability that cater to the hetero cis-male gaze.

At this point, because I am finding queerness in works that are not overtly so, I want to contextualize my use of this concept. Gender scholars may favor the term “queer” for its flexibility and boundlessness but the scholar also needs to set parameters for how they use the term in their work. For example, “queer” is characterized by Annemarie Jagose in *Queer Theory: An Introduction* as elastic, mobile, indeterminate and arising during moments of ambiguity.[33] Korean variety shows’ ambiguity as a genre allows both scholars and many viewers to anticipate its queerness through its unstable, excessive, and camp qualities. In cinema studies, Ungsan Kim defines queerness as “a stylistic and formalistic attitude that disrupts or alters cinematic conventions” that work in conjunction with filmic elements of “non-normative sexual desires.”[34] Kim acknowledges at the same time that the terms “queer” as well as “queer cinema” are unstable and always changing. Judith Butler observes that *queer* must remain open and cannot ever be “fully owned” so that it may evolve constantly into useful political applications.[35] The political application of queer theory matters greatly in contexts where rigid language and ideology repress identities that go beyond hegemonic recognition—as it is in the case with contemporary Korea. As Dong-jin Seo writes,

“Although homosexuality exists in modern-day Korean society, it seems to be an entity whose meaning has been endlessly deferred.”[36]

Seo laments the unhappiness which frequently defines homosexuality in Korean society because its “social existence” goes unrecognized. This raises the question of where Korea’s queer individuals can turn to for affirmation. Thus, in my application of the term “queer” herein, I include all qualities and identities that disrupt heteronormative and hegemonic assumptions, and this extends to not just individuals but also genre categories.

Yenŭng consistently displays queer and destabilized images of gender “norms” through humor. Jack Babuscio considers humor “the strategy of camp: a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity.”[37] The baseline of comedy in all yenŭng programs is not only a facet of its camp attributes, but it’s also a queer strategy that processes Korea’s patriarchal heaviness. Humor mitigates any real threats to the patrilineal heteronormative order; yenŭng programs are therefore “safe” for TV airing. In a country that has just one openly gay celebrity, it is impossible to state that queer people do not exist; yet they do not come out for fear of backlash. Yenŭng’s constant destabilization of gender, sexuality, customs and hierarchy make Korean variety TV queer. These family-friendly weekend variety programs that iterate state-approved prescriptions of socio-cultural “norms” are, in fact, expressing queerness at all times.

Yenŭng programs are typically hosted by comedians in a homosocial group. For instance, popular shows like *2 Days 1 Night* (KBS, 2007—), *Infinite Challenge* (MBC, 2005-2018), and *Ask Us Anything* feature an all-male cast. All-female yenŭng programs such as *Sisters’ Slam Dunk* (KBS, 2016-2017) and, the *Infinite Challenge* spin-off, *Infinite Girls* (MBC, 2007-2013) had much shorter runs compared to their male counterparts.



2 Days 1 Night season one with an all-male cast led by Kang Ho-dong.



The all-male cast of *Ask Us Anything* led by Kang Ho-dong.



Sisters’ Slam Dunk season one with an all-female cast led by Kim Sook.



The all-male cast of *Infinite Challenge* led by Yoo Jae-suk.

Because these shows are segregated by gender, queerness is always present through homosociality's queer potential, but this suggestion remains in tension with the programs' overt emphasis on heteronormativity, which is a strong socio-cultural underpinning of Korean society.



Infinite Girls season 3 with an all-female cast led by Song Eun-i.

Queer startext and the straight guys' queer possibility on variety TV

Cultural anthropologist Erick Laurent claims that queer culture in ancient Korea has conflicting roots tangled in Buddhist and Confucian ideologies that coexist in the nation's social and cultural fabric across centuries. Records of queerness in Korea date back to 350 AD with shamans who dressed outside of gender-normative outfits; in the 13th century, homosexual relations among the *hwarang* (men who served the royal court's military) and the *namsadang* (a mobile theater troupe) commonly occurred. But as Confucianism began to take hold in Korean society, the pressure to conform to a hetero-family unit began to rise: "Confucianism, its emphasis on social order and family, viewed male same-sex relations as a threat...." [38] Meanwhile, Buddhism, which was and is just as influential in Korea, promotes acceptance of homosexual engagement. Because of this, Laurent contends that while the burden to get married and produce offspring exist because of Confucianism, homosocial bonding is greatly accepted because of Buddhism in Korean society:

“[S]ame—sex friends living together before marriage, the fact of holding hands and rubbing each other in the street, of brushing a male friend’s buttock or genitals when parting. Nothing sexual will be interpreted.”[39]

The kind of homosocial acceptance that Laurent describes, however, has more to do with open homosexuality being so far from the realm of possibilities in Korean society that such homoerotic behavior will not be interpreted as anything but straight intimacy.[40] Ron Becker observes that post-closet U.S. TV narratives construct “queer straight guys” who are open to the possibility of male-to-male intimacy as well as emotional and physical bonding; the queer straight guy concept functions as a sign of liberal progression of the producers and viewers of that era.[41] In Korea, however, the nation’s open acceptance of homosocial bonding is a result of never considering queer relationships as a possibility. Queerness is not an option. With that said, *Ask Us Anything* includes instances of homosocial bonding and queer straight guy intimacy.



Kim Hee-chul of *Super Junior*.



Hee-chul's anecdote about the time he was confused for a woman by security.

Kim Hee-chul is a popular entertainer and emcee on numerous talk and variety television shows, but his stardom originates from the internationally beloved K-pop boyband Super Junior, which debuted in 2005. Since his debut, Kim has co-hosted over three dozen unscripted television programs on public, commercial and cable channels. Kim’s popularity among fans stems from his sharp wit and comedic timing but also from his close friendship with numerous girl group members and his androgynous appearance. For instance, Kim was mistaken for a woman by a security guard when he tried to enter a men’s room. Although many rumors speculate on his sexuality, Kim claims to be straight.[42] Kim also claims in interviews that he does not adamantly deny gay rumors for fear of offending his gay fans.[43]

On episode 37, Kim and the other members of the show play two rounds of a game called “the egg test,” which determines a man’s stamina by seeing who can hold an egg between their knees the longest. Kim wins both rounds of the test. Upon winning, Kim turns to the camera in direct address and says, “Dear future wife, aren’t you so grateful to me?” Kim performs his heteronormative masculinity here but he is mostly known on the show for his frequent cross-dressing and dancing alongside girl groups whenever they appear as guests. Kim is, by all means, “that bitch” on the show:

“Within the world of queer performance, being ‘that bitch’ is about having an exacting, unquestionable creative juice and asserting yourself through performance and style.”[44]



Kim Hee-chul joins Red Velvet in dance.

Kim’s male co-hosts tease him for this while also expressing their awe at how well he knows the girl groups’ dance moves. When Kim goes up to dance, the editors add graphics to give Kim long flowing hair, turning the moment into a CGI drag performance, as they did in episode 21 (air date Apr. 23, 2016) with a guest appearance by Red Velvet. Kim happens to know all the dance moves because he is a fan of Red Velvet’s music, but when the producers in the editing room place a CGI wig over Kim’s head, there is a hint of trans/homophobic ridicule in equating his love for a girl group as a gendered act. With that said, Kim’s “that bitch” attitude makes him a confident queer figure on *Ask Us Anything*. That is how he reacts towards speculations about his sexuality and he seems not to care whether or not his knowledge of girl group dance moves might challenge his gender or sexual identity. Thus, Kim gets constructed in two contradictory ways: he is a freely queer figure on the show and is also used to demonstrate moments of the show’s queer phobia. In addition, while male-to-female cross-dressing ridicules trans/queerness, as Quinlan Miller points out, such an image also informs queer viewers of a possibility toward productive queer imagining:



Kim Hee-chul dances with Red Velvet in CGI drag.

“The pain is part of it, but it can’t be the whole focus, especially if you take the actual lived existence of trans people...into account. Anecdotal evidence confirms that the medium was doing more than inflicting harm....”[45]

Onscreen cross-dressing is a camp feature—a superficial style.[46] Such images of gender nonconformity are also “a part of trans history.”[47] Kim’s persona on *Ask Us Anything* is “trans gender queer”—a term that “positions *gender* as a multiplicitous switch point between *trans* and *queer*....”[48] This term enables a wider and more inclusive reading of texts by taking gender and sexual orientations into account. By naming Kim trans gender queer, the myth that queer identities do not exist on Korean television and society is broken; queerness gets centered, and the variety genre’s camp gets recognized. In Kim’s trans gender queer performance, he not only dresses and embodies female attributes but also plays the role of a wife or girlfriend to some of the male cast members in their improv and sketch segments. In fact, Kim cross-dresses so frequently on *Ask Us Anything* that a fan created a supercut YouTube video of all the moments he appears as a woman on the show.[49]



Kim Hee-chul cross-dresses as a woman for a sketch on *Ask Us Anything*.



Hee-chul dresses as a high school girl and plays the girl character "Hee-mi" in an improv scene.



Rain shows off his “hard body.”

Kim’s confidence and enthusiasm whenever he dresses like a woman or dances alongside girl groups display Becker’s notion of straight guy queerness. Kim’s remaining untethered to gender “norms,” in fact, is a quality commonly found in many K-pop boybands. Male K-pop soloists and boybands have a flexible gender identity when it comes to expressions of masculinity, ranging from hard-bodied muscular images like Rain to softer, more effeminate images such as BTS and 2AM.[50] The range of masculine images for male K-pop stars, however, does not apply to girl groups, who must always accommodate the hetero-male gaze. Girl groups are pressured to maintain slim bodies, create certain facial features through surgery and makeup, wear short skirts and heels even when performing complex dance routines, and behave childishly (*aegyo*) to preserve the fantasy of the infantilized girl child.[51] There is a rigid gender expectation placed on girl groups to be hyper sexual, hyper feminine and youthful. Such gender disparity explains the variety show’s homosocial environment. Women are not invited to be regular cast members on popular programs like *Ask Us Anything*. In general, women are never cast in historically popular Korean variety shows such as *Infinite Challenge* and *2 Days 1 Night*. When women do appear as guests, they are expected to sing and dance for the men like show girls. And the KCC never penalizes these programs for such common instances of female objectification.



BTS (top) and 2AM (bottom) pose for photos with a colorful, soft and effeminate display of masculinity.



K-pop star HyunA performs "Bubble Pop" for the men who sit back and watch.



Yenung producers' consistent failure to cast women as regulars on programs is an industrial act of female exclusion. These variety shows that centralize men permit queer moments between cast members with male-to-female cross-dressing perhaps because remaining homosocial with the potential of crossing into queer boundaries is preferred over inviting actual women as show regulars. Furthermore, the drag performance by these straight men is an example of "hetero-masculine drag" that gets staged strictly for "fun and comedy." [52]

Kim Hee-chul's startext is queer while he maintains a straight orientation; this makes him a prime candidate for giving the show a hue of liberal progressiveness by exploring gender fluidity as well as queer intimacy. This is particularly evident in Kim's music video made with his variety show's co-host Min Kyung-hoon and the rest of the *Ask Us Anything* members and production staff. Entitled, "Sweet Dream," it has a storyline of a love triangle between Kim, Min and Momo from the K-pop girl group Twice. At the end of the video, when Kim happily meets Momo in-person, Min reacts with supportive joy for his friend but later, when no one is looking, he removes his hand from his desk to reveal the scrawl "Kim Hee-chul <3 Min Kyung-hoon," suggesting gay love.

Kim and Min are known on the show for their "bromance" and common

Girl group Twice dances for the men who sit back and watch.



Ga-in dances for the men.

expressions of straight guy queerness through words and actions just as much as Kim is known for his feminine tendencies on *Ask Us Anything*. With that said, Kim and Min also push the boundaries of this intimacy by frequently getting close onscreen with suggestive visual displays of same-sex love.[53] Including these characters on a show as popular as *Ask Us Anything* signals the text’s progressive choices. However, it is important to note that these queer intimacies all function in the realm of comedy. As Chambers claims,

“Thought rigorously, ‘queer television’ would describe television that suggests a relational understanding of (sexual) identity and/or television that resists or subverts normative heterosexuality.”[54]

Variety shows are known for their excessiveness and liminality through their comedy, skits, costumes and games, and thus they are the perfect temporary realm for all identities to transgress their social and cultural boundaries for a moment before the show ends and everyone returns to their regular social positions. Experimenting with gender crossover and homosocial play that edges towards homosexual intimacy are all acceptable in the secure bounds of the variety show genre and its comedy. With that said, *Ask Us Anything* also clearly demonstrates homophobia through its display of homosexual panic when an openly gay man appears as a guest.

| | |
|---|--|
| | |
| <p>"Kim Hee-chul <3 Min Kyung-hoon."</p> | <p>Kim Hee-chul and Min Kyung-hoon get close enough to share a kiss.</p> |

Open gayness on *Ask Us Anything*

Actor Hong Seok-cheon is an *Ask Us Anything* guest on January 13, 2018. The minute Hong arrives, jokes stemming from homosexual panic get thrown around among the cast members, which Hong plays into. When Kim Hee-chul asks Hong if he would care if Twice appeared, Hong expresses irritation at the thought of being surrounded by nine girls.



Hong Seok-cheon embraces the presence of a boy group.



Hong Seok-cheon rejects the presence of a girl group.

But when Kim mentions the boyband Wanna One which consists of eleven young men, Hong breaks out into a celebratory song and dance making his preference for men very clear. On the one hand, discussions of gayness are relatively prevalent on a variety show, where they can exhibit queerness through the safety net of comedy. It happens in the way that Becker discusses the constant presence of humor around television discussions of homosexuality, which demonstrates a persistent cultural anxiety around LGBTQIA+ themes in the mainstream:

“That most queer straight guys are found safely wrapped in comedic irony reveals a culture nervously processing its changing politics of gender and sexuality rather than one fully confident in a vision of some queer future.”[55]

At the same time, homosexuality is also a threat on a set like *Ask Us Anything* where all the male members are confined to a homosocial space; Hong's openly gay identity activates homosexual panic in the room. Hong's deviance from heterosexuality is a threat to the members' masculinity. As long as they are telling jokes, however, the threat of Hong's sexuality is under control. While Hong appears as an LGBTQIA+ member who has found success on television, due to the “dominant currents within televisual flow...[he is]...no longer quite queer...”[56]

This kind of use and disavowal of homosexuality exemplifies Lisa Duggan's concept of “new homonormativity.” That is, a shallow or false liberation in gay politics gets promised while maintaining dominant heteronormative systems and organizations. According to her, the problematics of homonormativity is rooted in U.S. political economy and neoliberal rationality as they dismantle and depoliticize queer politics. This happens through the privatization and monetization of gay culture, and places the onus of political responsibility on the individual while equating political practice with consumerism and wealth.[57] Hong's career as a gay celebrity in Korea follows a similar pattern of homonormativity.



Hong is the first celebrity in Korea to come out as gay in 2000. Upon coming out, Hong faced industry homophobia. He lost all of his broadcasting and advertisement deals including the children's program *PoPoPo* (MBC, 1981-2013) on which he was a regular. In *Ask Us Anything*, Hong casually mentions this period in passing. He tells how he could not make any television appearances for three years but without explicitly mentioning that the cause of this break took place due to homophobic backlash from the industry. Hong then transitions into a story about how his passion for cooking enabled him to become a great chef and successful restaurateur (he owns seven restaurants in Seoul's queer-friendly



Hong recounts the period of his coming out.

district Itaewon). The congratulatory and triumphalist tone of this anecdote, however, skirts the fact that Hong had to seek an alternative means of survival after losing his job in entertainment as a consequence of coming out.

Hong is now back on as a regular in multiple television programs; however, the industry's acceptance of Hong's gay identity was contingent upon his success as a restaurateur. This demonstrates the conditional acceptance of gayness for economic purposes—a logic and practice found in the US television industry as well, where executives target white upper middle class gay and lesbian viewers as consumers.[58] Hong's return to the public eye is accepted by Korean society despite his gay identity because of capital success. Furthermore, Hong's wealth and status afford him the luxury to take time off, make a career transition and start a new business. Living an openly gay life in Korea, however, is not an option for everyone, especially if they lack the economic means to live apart from their families or if they get fired as a consequence of coming out or being outed. Hong's bold move to come out in 2000 has empowered numerous others. With that said, Hong's persistent treatment in mainstream television as the token gay man whose sexuality gets reduced to a joke is a testament to Korea's social and cultural lag in accepting and humanizing its LGBTQIA+ citizens.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



In an improv scene, Guk-joo scares former basketball player Jang-hoon.



In an improv scene, Jang-hoon tells Guk-joo that he wants to leave her for a thinner woman.



In an improv scene, Guk-joo throws water in Jang-hoon's face for calling her "too healthy."

Threats to hetero masculinity: trans gender queer and masculine female comedians

Heteronormative ideals on *Ask Us Anything* are prominent. Whenever a female guest who meets the standards that qualify her as desirable to the male gaze by being conventionally beautiful, young, slim, and demure, the cast members greet them with loud and unrestrained joy. It conjures the classic animation of Tex Avery's Big Bad Wolf who howls, whistles, and bangs his head with a mallet at the sight of an attractive woman. But when female comedians who do not meet patriarchal physical standards like Lee Guk-joo, Jo Hye-ryun and Park Narae appear as guests, the cast members treat them as undesirable or threatening. For instance when Lee Guk-joo and Kim Ji-min appear as guests (airdate Feb. 13, 2016), the male cast members immediately express disappointment at the sight of two comedians instead of a K-pop girl group. When they come on stage, the two women are immediately desexualized and treated with mild disdain through humorous banter. Lee Soo-geun makes a joke about Lee Guk-joo's fat body by comparing hers to Kang Ho-dong's huskiness and masculinity.

In another episode (airdate Sept. 10, 2016) a different group of female comedians—Park Mi-sun, Jo Hye-ryun and Park Narae—appear as guests. Park Narae instantly notes the male cast members' lackadaisical reception of them. After introductions, the members bring up news headlines about Park Mi-sun's recent physical transformation; she'd become extremely fit through personal training which the men openly praise thus reinforcing patriarchal standards for the female body. This exchange follows: Kang Ho-dong challenges Park Mi-sun to prove it to which she jokingly replies, "Are you saying I should take it off?"

Kim Hee-chul chimes in and says, "The fittest person here actually appears to be Hye-ryun *noona*." [59] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The men gawk at Jo Hye-ryun's brawny calves which they notice through her skirt; as a joke, Kim Young-chul asks her if she boxes. Kang laughs hysterically while calling attention to the size of Jo's knee caps. Jo jokes that she built her calf muscles by shoveling on a farm. The men compare Jo's body and her overall aggressive demeanor to the bear that attacks Hugh Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio) in *The Revenant* (2015, Alejandro González Iñárritu). The men laugh but also look at Jo's legs in awe and envy, projecting an idealized masculine fantasy of a muscular male body onto a cis-woman. Jo does not meet their expectations of a desirable woman but of a man whom they wish to embody. Such a moment in the show exemplifies Jo's trans gender queerness in the "flipping [of] the social codes of gender and sexuality." [60] Jo then brings Park Narae close to her and compares both their legs side by side saying, "Hers are no joke, either," to which the camera zooms in and establishes a close-up shot of both Park Narae and Jo's robustly built legs as the men's cackling resounds in the background. Kim Hee-chul then comments,

"Two ladies are raising their skirts at us and there's no embarrassment at all."

Kim's elucidation gives insight into how the male cast members view these female comedians—not as women but as comedic figurines meant to be stared at for their lack of femininity and traditionally masculine (butch) attributes. The gaze is like in a freak show. But these women are not openly lesbian or bi-sexual; they just



Jo Hye-ryun and Park Narae's legs.

happen to emanate female masculinity by rejecting “the strictures of femininity.” On television these strictures are established by commercial Korean patriarchal demands that become visible in the male cast members’ reactions onscreen, blending shock and mirth with hints of disdain, confusion and incredulity at the sight of these women comedians’ bodies.[61]

While the most familiar and widely accepted version of female masculinity is found in adolescent cis-girls in the form of a tomboy, as Jack Halberstam notes, tomboys also get punished when the girls reach puberty because of the threat tomboyism poses on social and familial traditions and expectations.[62] In the case with women like Park Mi-sun, Jo and Park Narae, their ages range between 30 and 50, thus making the threat even greater as coming from grown women. Jo and Park Narae’s single status transgresses these expectations even further thus queering them all the more, given Korea’s dominant heteronormative expectation of all adults to get wed and settle down. These female comedians are not only single but they are also not “feminine” in the conventional sense (slim, young, pretty, shy, demure, etc.); based on how the members treat these women, they are interchangeable with men. In the context of this show, female comedians can be swapped specifically with gay men in that both groups threaten the heteronormative order and are received similarly by straight cis-male cast members, signaling their queerness. As Richard Dyer mentions, “the female” does not exist—only “the non-male”:

“[T]he only way a woman can be accepted as a person (except as a demeaned, and still ultimately threatening, sexual object) is for her to become ‘non-male’; that is to say without gender.”[63]

For instance, at one point, Park Narae turns her back to the men and bends over. All the men look away in humiliation in response to her sexual aggression, which is expressed through her short and stocky body emanating butch dominance and which the men find unsettling. This is why they mitigate their discomfort by demeaning her body in the form of jokes; the female comedians’ trans gender queer presence threatens hegemonic masculinity. That threat is visible in the male cast members’ open reaction of disdain, disappointment or disapproval of these women by gasping, turning away, or just laughing disparagingly.

Ask Us Anything preserves hegemonic masculine ideals through both misogyny and homophobia in the male cast members’ disqualifying or rejection of the female comedians on the show as women; meanwhile, these women take on a trans gender queer dimension, thereby queering the show. John Fiske’s concept of “excess as hyperbole” on television defines this inherent contradiction that television has in its ability to support hegemonic ideals (sexism and homophobia) while also being critical of them—however unwittingly or indirectly—through transgressions such as straight guy queerness and trans gender queerness as in the case with *Ask Us Anything*. [64] However, while *Ask Us Anything* has queer presence on its show through queer startexts like Kim Hee-chul and masculine women, it ultimately underscores heteronormative values by pairing the women with men as couples to compete in games, quizzes and perform improvised skits together while laughing at the women’s display of gender nonconformity.



Hee-chul and Mi-sun play a couple with a major age gap shocking their family members in an improv scene.



The female guests couple up with the male cast members for their sketch.

The KCC and male cronyism

Cable channels like JTBC have slightly more leniency in terms of censorship compared to public broadcasters such as KBS and MBC, and commercial broadcaster Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) which are available as terrestrial (free) TV. With that said, the Broadcasting Act applies to all Korean networks, and if they break any KCC rules or provisions, they are subject to warnings, fines and penalties in the workplace including a demotion.

On Feb. 7, 2018, I conducted an in-person interview with Ana Park—a former variety show producer-director (PD) who worked for SBS television and radio back in 2011.[65] Park explained that despite the KCC’s standards for broadcasting and censorship, the relationship between the chief producer (CP) and the members of the board at the KCC is what determines the outcome of these cases. When a PD gets hit with a warning, there are a number of possibilities that could result ranging from it being just a warning to a demotion. If the CP in charge of that team is close to members of the KCC, then the KCC overlooks any issues that could otherwise be problematic, e.g. cursing, slang, innuendos, etc. If the CP has no relationship with the KCC, or, even worse, a bad one, then the committee tends to be more scrupulous in their monitoring of the show and come down with harder punishments. Park extrapolated that the latter is likely the case with *Ask Us Anything* involving Ahn Sol-bin’s question to Kim Hee-chul:

“Asking someone jokingly if they are gay on a comedy show is hard to qualify as an offense. How can [the KCC] know if the majority of the viewers were offended by this? It’s hard to measure what turns an entire audience off. What ultimately matters is what the relationship is like between the CP and the board members of the KCC.”[66]

Park’s response is a direct reflection of how masculinist-cronyist politics—non-contractual “gentleman’s agreements”—dictate the political and social networks of the broadcasting industry and state institution.[67] The hetero-masculinist nature of these networks make female and queer identities impossible to enter—a reflection of how the industry maintains its hegemonic social infrastructure. Park believes that the KCC is an archaic concept:

“Back when I was working in TV, we all looked at the KCC like they were just a bunch of old men with too much time on their hands. They had nothing better to do so they came after us. Also, a lot of the men working at the KCC were former PDs whose programs didn’t do so

well, so now they are working for the state. If they were good at their jobs, then they'd still be working in the industry, right?"[68]

PDs who retire from the industry often write books on how to work in the industry, or get a PhD and become professors in communications and media studies. Others get hired by the state and work at the KCC. According to Park's testimony, however, it's also possible that the PDs who work at the KCC are disgruntled former industry workers. This makes the relations between the industry and the state institution all the more dependent on how satisfied the KCC members are with the PDs they formerly knew as colleagues. There is an added social pressure among PDs due to this incestuous relationship between the KCC and networks, seeing as the KCC's decision to take disciplinary action against a program can be capricious. People of lesser power are more vulnerable in situations where decisions are made arbitrarily. In an environment where interpersonal relationships dictate decision makings, it becomes difficult for workers to have any certainty about their place in the industry's strata. Cronyism makes it all the more difficult for non-hetero and non-cis-men (e.g., women and queer identifying individuals) to have any influence seeing as they are not invited to social settings that have professional impact. Park was careful to explain that finding favor with the broadcaster and the higher ups also depends on just how much the program is favored by viewers and listeners:

"If a PD's program has incredibly high ratings but also a bunch of warnings, it becomes trickier for the CP. Ultimately, though, money wins. If you look at a show like *Cultwo*, it's partially successful because of the show's edginess and frankness. They've been hit with multiple warnings.[69] The DJs would even drink on the show, or show up to work after having a few. This is an absolutely unacceptable way to conduct broadcasts, and they've been warned by the KCC multiple times, but their ratings have remained steadily high. Audiences love them. So, in a case like theirs, the program and its staff are protected by other influences. A broadcaster can't afford to shut down a show with such high popularity." [70]



Hye-ryun beats up Ho-dong in an improv scene.



Hye-ryun claims to have built the house Ho-dong lives in. A CGI of an A-frame with bricks and an ax gets superimposed over her back to animate her masculine strength.

Park's explanation here is an example of immunity to power that comes from market success, demonstrating the KCC's inconsistency while reaffirming the broad/narrowcasting system's neoliberal values. A show like *Ask Us Anything* happens to be one of these programs that boasts high enough ratings at JTBC to maintain its influence regardless of issues with the KCC. Based on this industry insight, the KCC's concern for how *Ask Us Anything* offends the LGBTQIA+ community and women is questionable.

Regardless of whether or not the LGBTQIA+ community and women are offended, *Ask Us Anything* exhibits both oppressive and emancipatory moments of queer viewing. The variety show's inherent openness as a genre allows greater queer possibilities among a homosocial cast. Images of straight guy queer intimacy as well as trans gender queer startexts and moments abound on *Ask Us Anything*. However, the show also includes sexist leanings in how the male cast members prefer straight guy queer intimacy over regular engagement with women on set and do not hire female comics. This exclusion of women as regular cast members on the show results from feelings of threat to their hetero masculinity and the heteronormative social order per the nation's standards determined by the state and industry. Nevertheless, the female comedians who appear as guests embody queerness through gender non-conformity and gender bending while playing with the male gaze in both subversive and transgressive ways. In this way, they also manage to expose how the show maintains patriarchal preference towards a female image that caters to the male gaze.



Hye-ryun shows K-pop star Cha O-ru how to hit a guy with a hammer. CGI puts Thor's cape on Hye-ryun's back to animate her masculine strength.

Queer politics in Korean variety television is discursively visible on a state, industrial and generic level, but within the text, its manifestations are far more complex. In this intricate tapestry of variety, it is difficult to pinpoint specific moments of offense and label them in black and white as the KCC has. What the KCC missed are moments of actual misogyny and queer phobia on the show as well as moments of subversion and transgression that allow a hyper-queer presence on the show. The KCC never penalizes the show for regular female objectification when young female guests stars who fit the standards of the cis-male gaze are asked to sing and dance for the male cast members. They also miss moments of agentic female liberation through strong and confident women like Lee Guk-joo, Jo Hye-ryun, Park Mi-sun and Park Narae who, despite the constant mocking of their bodies and appearances, persist in their abilities to make the cast members laugh, flaunt their bodies confidently and maintain televisual presence however temporal. My research indicates that we should see the Korean variety shows as the *variety* that they are which includes a degree of celebration of difference. While there may be moments of misogyny as well as homo/transphobia, there are also freeing moments for female guest stars to derange the male gaze and for trans gender queer stars to maintain a queer occupancy on Korean TV. This deserves acknowledgment.

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Notes

1. *Ask Us Anything* is also known as *Knowing Bros* and as *Men on a Mission* on Netflix; for the purposes of this article, I use the McCune-Reischauer romanization save for the spelling of names. [[return to page 1](#)]
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4. By "hegemonic masculinity," I am referring to the dominant hetero masculinity in Korea which propagates misogyny; see Woori Han et al, "Gendering the Authenticity of the Military Experience: Male Audience Responses to the Korean Reality Show *Real Men*," *Media, Culture & Society*, 2017, 39:1, 62-67; the authors base their concept of hegemonic masculinity from Gramsci's (1973) work on hegemony.
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7. Ibid, 338; this show is also known as *Seonam Girls High School Detectives*.
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14. Korea Broadcasting Act, The Korea Communications Commission, chapter 1, article 5, paragraph 5, 6.
15. Ibid, chapter 1, article 6, paragraph 2, 6; chapter 1, article 6, paragraph 5, 6.
16. Ibid, chapter 1, article 5, paragraph 5, 6.
17. Suk-Hee Kim et al, "Long-Term Care Needs of the Elderly in Korea and Elderly Long-Term Care Insurance," *Social Work in Public Health*, 25 (2) 2010: 176-184.
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20. Paula Hancocks and Lauren Suk, "Dozens arrested as South Korea military conducts 'gay witch-hunt,' *CNN*, June 11, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/11/asia/south-korea-lgbt-military/index.html>.
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23. Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 45.
24. John (Song Pae) Cho, "The Three Faces of South Korea's Male Homosexuality: Pogal, Iban, and Neoliberal Gay," *Queer Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 263-294, 265-266.
25. Ibid, 265.
26. Jesook Song, *Living On Your Own: Single Women, Rental Housing, and Post-Revolutionary Affect in Contemporary South Korea*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 33.
27. Ibid.
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29. Todd A. Henry, "Queer Lives as Cautionary Tales: Female Homoeroticism and the Heteropatriarchal Imagination of Authoritarian South Korea," ed. *Queer Korea*, 205-259, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 210-212.
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variety TV," *Media, Culture & Society*, 2020, 42(1): 191-206, 193.

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32. Jung, 192-193.

33. Annemarie Jagose, 1996, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: NYU Press).

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39. Ibid, 206.

40. Ibid.

41. Becker, "Guy Love: A Queer Straight Masculinity for a Post-Closet Era?" *Queer TV, Theories, Histories, Politics*, Ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 121-140, 125.

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46. Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 67.

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54. Chambers, 21.

55. Becker, 135.

56. Lynn Joyrich, “Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams,” *Cinema Journal*, 53 (2) 2014: 133-139, 134.

57. Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, 175-194, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 179.

58. Becker, “Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties: Network Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics.”

59. “Noona” is a formal way of addressing an older sister or an older sister figure. [\[return to page 3\]](#)

60. Miller, 108.

61. Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 59.

62. Ibid, 6.

63. Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 63-64.

64. John Fiske, *Television Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1987 2011), 90-91.

65. For the protection of the interviewee and per her request, “Ana Park” is a pseudonym.

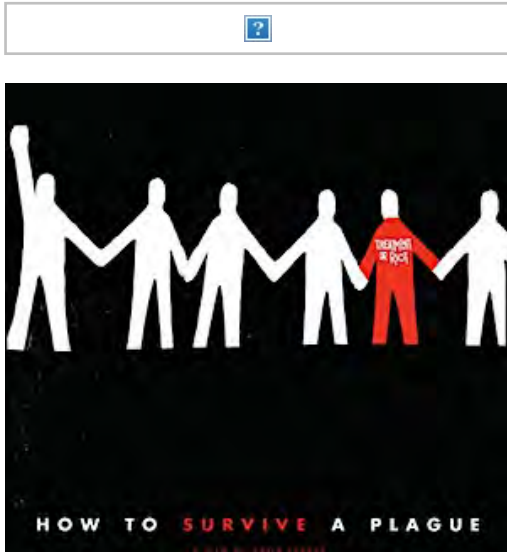
66. Ana Park, in-person interview by author, Feb. 7, 2018.

67. For more on cronyism politics in Korea, see Joanna Elfving-Hwang, “Aestheticizing Authenticity: Corporate Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Television Drama....” *Asia Pacific Perspectives*, 15:1, 2017, 55-72; Judith Irwin, “Doing Business in South Korea: An Overview of Ethical Aspects,” *Occasional Paper 2*, (London: Institute of Business Ethics, 2010).

68. Ana Park.

69. *Cultwo* is a popular variety radio program on SBS that’s been on air since 2006 hosted by variety talk show hosts Jung Chan-woo and Kim Tae-gyun.

70. Ana Park.



Movie poster for Oscar-nominated documentary film *How to Survive A Plague* (2012).



Movie poster for Oscar-winning biopic film *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013).

Cable access queer: revisiting *Toronto Living with AIDS* (1990-1991)

by [Ryan Conrad](#)

AIDS activists changed the world. They organized, strategized, and put their bodies on the line to change their medical, social, and political circumstances. Importantly, AIDS activists in North America did all this with early consumer-grade video technologies in hand. From the committed documentary to the experimental short, AIDS activists engaged in change-making at the level of culture through moving images in new ways and on a scale not possible during previous social movements. [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Due to the parallel development of increasingly affordable consumer grade video technologies alongside the rapidly expanding AIDS crisis, scholars, activists, and media makers have an expansive decentralized archive from which to consult, study, and make new meaning. The importance of revisiting and maintaining this archive, as film scholar Roger Hallas notes, is not merely to preserve the past for the sake of history, but to attend to the stories that emerge from AIDS activist cultural archives and their revelatory potential for historical consciousness in the present. [2]

We live at a moment of great interest and reinvestment in the history of AIDS activism in the U.S. and Canada. These histories are undergoing a storytelling process through which certain accounts begin to take canonical form. While this process of canonization makes AIDS activist histories more available to those who did not experience them firsthand, this process also leads to the occlusion of complex, lesser known, and marginalized aspects of the histories at stake. [3] AIDS activist histories in the U.S. are being solidified through autobiographies, memoirs, oral history projects, massive art retrospectives such as the 2015-2017 touring exhibition “Art AIDS America,” and recently-produced historical dramas, television movies, and activist documentaries, most notably the Oscar-nominated films *How to Survive a Plague* (2012) and *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013).

The alternative media work of Canadian AIDS activists is largely absent from these more well-known U.S. history projects. Furthermore, scholarship on alternative media practices in Canada largely occludes or only briefly mentions the history of AIDS activist media and the contribution of AIDS activist media makers. [4] This paper remedies this oversight by providing a complementary analysis of Canadian-made AIDS activist videos from the *Toronto Living With AIDS* (TLWA) cable access project, thereby facilitating future possibilities for comparative scholarly work examining the histories of AIDS activist media globally, and across the U.S.-Canadian border in particular.



Toronto Living With AIDS community cable television series poster from 1990 designed by Barr Gilmore. [Click here to see full program and poster.](#)

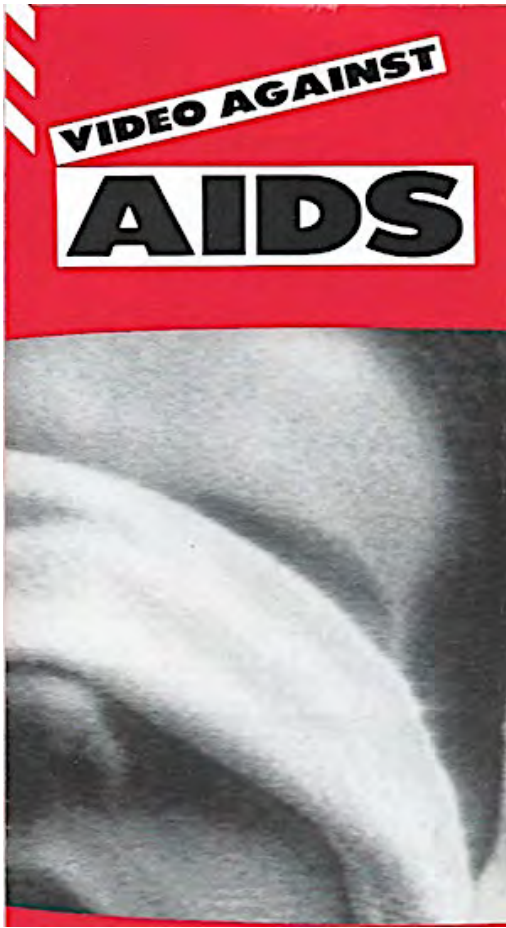


Title sequence from the opening of Greyson's compilation tape *Angry Initiatives, Defiant Strategies* for Deep Dish Television in 1989.

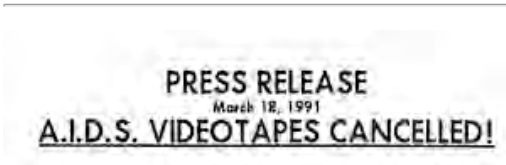
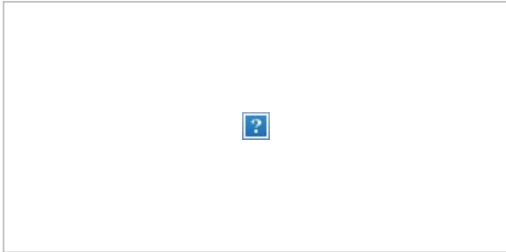


TLWA was a cable access television series distributed on Rogers and MacLean-Hunter cable networks in Toronto from 1990-1991. It was produced under the leadership of white gay Toronto video artists Michael Balser (1952-2002) and John Greyson. The two worked out of the same artist-run centre, Trinity Square Video, and they were associated with the artist-run video distribution centre Vtape, whose board Greyson presides over as President in 2020.[5] Inspired by the Gay Men's Health Crisis' *Living with AIDS* cable access television series in New York City (1988-1994), TLWA also followed up two of Greyson's previous AIDS activist video curation projects: the compilation tape *Angry Initiatives, Defiant Strategies* produced for U.S.-based Deep Dish TV in 1988 and the three volume international English-language compilation he produced in collaboration with U.S. curator Bill Horrigan, *Video Against AIDS* (1989).[6] Greyson and Balser's approach to TLWA very much mirrored the politics and aesthetics of public access cable television in the U.S. at the time, an antecedent to so-called community television in Canada. Critic and curator Tom Folland notes that unlike in the U.S., private Canadian broadcast corporations that oversaw community television stations had final decision-making power over the content they broadcast—with station managers acting as both gatekeepers of style and censors of content they personally disliked or deemed in bad taste. Folland cites this notable difference between the two countries as the reason why community television thrived relatively unencumbered in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s while it struggled to take hold in Canada even after the National Film Board's huge investment in community-led alternative media making through its innovative *Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle* (1967-1980) program.[7] This significant difference in how community television is regulated in Canada would lead to an adversarial and acrimonious relationship between TLWA's coordinator Michael Balser and Rogers Cable's station manager Ed Nasello.

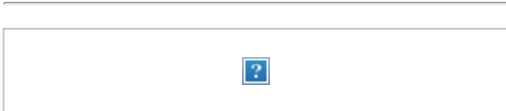
Interestingly, the TLWA series was funded not by municipal, provincial, or federal arts councils, but by grants from the City of Toronto Board of Health, Health & Welfare Canada (now simply called Health Canada), and the Ontario Ministry of Health.[8] Two pilot episodes, *The Great AZT Debate* and *The World is Sick (sic)*, were produced by Balser and Greyson in 1989 with seed money from the City of Toronto Board of Health. These two videos began the *Toronto Living With AIDS* cable broadcast and were paired with a variety of other AIDS activist video tapes coming out of the United States. Combined, these U.S. and Canadian tapes provided months of weekly broadcast material in the Spring of 1990 during which time Balser and Greyson coordinated their efforts to secure further funding to produce more Canadian-made tapes. They circulated a call for proposals, assembled a selection committee to evaluate proposals, and in the end settled on ten artists to fund out of fifty proposals.[9]



Video Against AIDS program brochure that accompanied the three-volume set of compilation tapes. [Click here to see full program.](#)



March 18, 1991 press release written by Michael Balser upon the censorship and cancellation of *TLWA* that contests who counts as the “viewing public.” [Click here to see full press release.](#)



Game show host introducing Greyson's 1989 pilot video for *TLWA* entitled *The Great AZT Debate*.



Title sequence for Greyson's 1989 pilot video for *TLWA* documenting the Fifth International AIDS Conference in Montreal entitled *The World is Sick (sic)*.

Eventually not ten, but another twelve thirty-minute videos were created under the *TLWA* banner by a diverse array of video artists working in collaboration with community organizations in Toronto in the latter half of 1990. With funding from federal and provincial health ministries, each artist was commissioned \$5,000 to create their 30-minute videos and was encouraged to seek other financial and in-kind support from arts councils and AIDS service organizations alike.[10] Kaspar Saxena and Debbie Douglas, both contributors to the series, noted that while these commissions were integral in getting these tapes started, the videos mostly remained a labour of love requiring far greater production budgets and were primarily funded through in-kind labour, donated time, and shared equipment. [11] Adjusted for inflation, this commission would be equivalent to just over \$8,500 in 2020.[12]

Videos in the series ranged in form and content, from the committed documentary to the experimental short, and from the playfully erotic to the didactically pedagogical. While differing in form and content, all the tapes in the series took seriously the medium of television as having the potential to teach and impart critical information about HIV/AIDS as much as it had the potential to entertain the imagined audiences viewing the series on their cable-connected televisions at home. The potential of pedagogical televisual entertainment about HIV/AIDS, as communications scholar Malynnda Johnson notes, is that it can be a particularly useful intervention for young people in the absence of comprehensive sex education curricula, or any sex education at all as the case often continues to be.[13]



Memo

To: Michael Balser, *Living With AIDS*
From: Rogers Video Community 10
Date: February 22, 1991

Rogers Cable station manager Ed Nasello's letter to Michael Balser indicating that he was pulling the series from distribution on their network due to the series being "in bad taste." [Click here to see full memo.](#)



Title sequence from Darien Taylor and Michael Balser's *Voices of Positive Women* that was made in place of a second season of *TLWA* focused on women when funding for the series was not renewed.



Wendi Alexis Modeste speaking in direct address



The sweet and sensual communal shower scene in *Fighting Chance* that first raised the possibility of *TLWA*'s censorship.



The two South Asian men French kissing in *Bolo Bolo!* that led to *TLWA*'s censorship and de facto cancellation by Rogers Cable.

Unfortunately, it was a loving, but not explicit communal shower scene in Richard Fung's *Fighting Chance* that first raised the possibility of censorship from Rogers Cable. Kaspar Saxena and Ian Rashid's erotic, yet again far from explicit, educational video on AIDS in the Toronto South Asian community entitled *Bolo! Bolo!* (1991) further angered Ed Nasello, the Rogers Cable station manager at the time. In a letter sent to *TLWA*'s coordinator, Nasello claimed that Balser had made an "error in judging the public's taste" by including a video with "men French kissing and the caressing of thighs" in the series, specifically referencing *Bolo! Bolo!* as the offending tape.[14] While the series formally ended as a result of this censorship, some of the original tapes continued to be shown at film festivals and organizations kept their tapes in circulation for educational and outreach purposes. The second season of *TLWA* was intended to focus exclusively on women and HIV, a likely result of the growing number of women testing positive in Canada.[15] The growing attention to women and HIV was also bolstered by the World Health Organization's declaration that the theme of World AIDS Day in 1990 as "Women and AIDS." [16] Unfortunately, after Rogers Cable refused to air the series any longer continued federal funding was also denied. The proposed second season of *TLWA* was reduced to a much humbler single thirty-minute video instead, the Darien Taylor-directed and Michael Balser-produced 1992 portrait-style international documentary *Voices of Positive Women*. [17]

TLWA represents the largest and most organized community-based effort to create audiovisual work about the AIDS crisis in Canada. Although other community cable stations in Canada broadcast some HIV/AIDS-focused content created by gay community cable programs like Gayblevision in Vancouver, Thunder Gay Magazine in Thunder Bay, and the Gay Media Collective in Winnipeg, none of these projects were specifically organized around HIV/AIDS and produced a limited quantity of HIV/AIDS programming primarily in the form of newscasts. Also, unlike individual artist responses to the epidemic of which there are many, the series was uniquely funded with public money from health agencies and distributed on community cable television stations, making it a fascinating political, cultural, and social phenomenon. Indeed, the censorship of the series demonstrates the deep disjuncture between Canadian public health policy that funded the series as an urgently needed form of educational programming and Canadian cultural policy that broadly defines and limits obscenity from public distribution.

One cannot fully understand the impact of the decision by Rogers Cable station manager to censor the decidedly queer *TLWA* series without putting into relief the decades of censorship of queer content in Canada that precedes it: two obscenity trials involving the Toronto gay liberation newspaper *The Body Politic* in the 1970s and 1980s; decades of materials seized by Canada Customs while in route to LGBT bookstores like Little Sister's in Vancouver and Glad Day in Toronto;

as one of the women featured in *Voices of Positive Women*.

ongoing censorship battles over sexual content with the British Columbia Film Classification Office, the Ontario Film Review Board, and its predecessor the Ontario Censor Board throughout the 1980s and 1990s; The Wimmin's Fire Brigade's multiple bombings of the adult video store chain Red Hot Video in 1982; The Fraser Committee on Pornography report from 1987; the tabling of the Conservative's anti-pornography and obscenity legislation Bill C-54 in 1987; and the controversy swelling around Vancouver lesbian arts collective Kiss and Tell's explicit photo exhibition of lesbian BDSM first mounted in 1990.[18] Together, these conflicts over sexuality and its cultural representations, including the censorship of the *TLWA* series, would come to be called the culture wars in Canada with parallel developments in the U.S..[19]



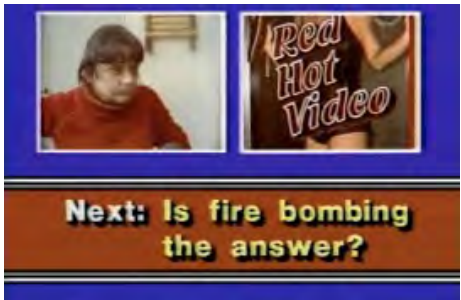
Title sequence from Aerlyn Weissman's 2002 documentary *Little Sister's vs Big Brother* that documented the very public feud between queer bookstores and Canada Customs.



Still from *Little Sister's vs Big Brother* that documented one of many protests against Canadian Customs for seizing queer books and magazine they deemed obscene.



The heated battle between Little Sister's and Canadian customs was central to the plot line of Anne Wheeler's 1999 indie lesbian romantic comedy *Better Than Chocolate* still.



The firebombing of adult video store chain Red Hot Video by the Wimmin's Fire Brigade added to the already heated debates over sexuality and censorship – *Webster!* BCTV November 25, 1982.



The Fraser Committee on Prostitution and Pornography in the 1980s created a very public conversation on sexual representation and pornography in Canada and was covered on television regularly –



Still from Lorna Boschman's mediation on lesbian sexual representation, obscenity, and censorship, *True Inversion* (1992).



Still from Lorna Boschman's documentary tape about lesbian collective Kiss and Tell's explicit lesbian BDSM and kink-friendly photo exhibition *Drawing the Line* (1992).



The hundreds of video tapes erroneously staged as evidence of a child porn and prostitution ring by police in London, ON in 1993 take from Greyson's TV documentary *After the Bath* (1995).

The censorship battles would of course continue after the cancelling of *TLWA* as well, most notably with the *R v Butler* decision in 1992 that vaguely defines obscene materials and “community standards” in the Criminal Code, the 1993 London Ontario gay pornography and prostitution scandal chronicled in John Greyson's 1995 CBC television documentary *After the Bath*, and the Supreme Court's underwhelming decision in *Little Sister's v Canada* that was captured in detail in Aerlyn Weissman's documentary *Little Sister's vs. Big Brother* (2002). [20] All these examples of queer censorship signify the necessity of understanding the impact of *TLWA*'s censorship by Rogers Cable as part of a historic and ongoing assault on queer sexual representations in Canada, even when said materials were intended for educational purposes to prevent the transmission of a deadly virus ravaging queer and/or racialized communities. Such censorship demonstrates that not only was queer sexuality itself “distasteful” in the eyes of state and corporate bureaucrats, but that queer lives were in fact expendable. Furthermore, scholar and film critic Cindy Patton notes that the erotic depictions of racialized gay men in particular were at the centre of the *TLWA* censorship controversy, unsurprisingly bringing together xenophobia, racism, and homophobia.[21]

Library and Archives Canada's 2017 “Canadian National Heritage and Digitization Strategy” outlines the urgent need for systematic digitization and preservation of audiovisual cultural heritage like *TLWA* at a time when 20th century histories are literally disappearing before our eyes.[22] Indeed, much of *TLWA* had been lost to history until I began digging around in various archives when I began working at the AIDS Activist History Project in 2018. Sadly, most of the tapes in the series have been completely out of circulation for decades and the few that remained in distribution through Vtape lost their original connection to the series, therefore seeming to stand alone as opposed to appearing in concert with the rest of the contributions to *TLWA*. Like the few tapes that remained in circulation uncoupled from their shared origins as part of *TLWA*, the little scholarship that has touched upon a few tapes in the series fails to explore with any depth their connection to the broader *TLWA* series if they even mention it at all.[23] This paper is part of a larger project to recover, preserve, digitize, historicize, and analyse the *TLWA* series and its impact in Toronto and Canada more broadly. Through examining the tapes included in the series below, this paper introduces contemporary scholars, media makers, and activists to the unique history of Canadian AIDS activist video practices and the conditions under which the *TLWA* series was made both possible and unpalatable for imagined publics.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The lives and afterlives of the *TLWA* tapes



A photograph of AIDS Action Now! and the Prostitutes Safe Sex Project protesting Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health Richard Schabas over trying to quarantine HIV-positive people through Section 22 of the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*.

TLWA tapes were written and produced in the context of socially conservative austerity governments in power across Canada (Mulroney), the UK (Thatcher), and the U.S. (Reagan and Bush), from the outset of the epidemic in the early 1980s to the early 1990s when *TLWA* was broadcast on community cable television. During this period AIDS-related deaths continued to climb at devastating rates while political leaders and health agencies dragged their feet acknowledging the existence of the epidemic, let alone implementing provincial and federal AIDS treatment and prevention strategies. The promised effective treatments from researchers and pharmaceutical companies on the horizon did not materialize until six years after *TLWA* was broadcast, and well over a decade after the first recorded case of AIDS in Canada in 1982. Various HIV quarantine laws had been discussed and proposed provincially across Canada, including the 1990 proposal by Ontario's then Chief Medical Officer of Health Richard Schabas to classify HIV as a virulent disease and therefore legitimizing the use of quarantine on sexually active HIV-positive people.[24] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The first criminal prosecutions for HIV exposure began in 1989, paving the way for Canada's present-day sordid reputation for being a world leader in criminal prosecutions for HIV non-disclosure per capita.[25]



One of many AIDS ACTION NOW!'s public demonstrations in Toronto. Image courtesy of the AIDS Activist History Project.

Réaction SIDA



Réunions tous les mercredis à 19h
Meetings every Wednesday at 7 p.m.

2035 St-Laurent
Métro St-Laurent

CONTACT: 862-6765

LE SILENCE ET L'INACTION DOIVENT ARRÊTÉR

Reaction SIDA meeting flyer leading up to the
Fifth International AIDS Conference in Montreal
in 1989.

STOP THE QUARANTINE FIRE SCHABAS

AIDS quarantine plan draws protest

By Kelly Toughill
TORONTO STAR

Anyone infected with the AIDS virus who continues to have intercourse could be forcibly confined under a new public health proposal — even if a condom is used and the person wears latex for her sex partner of the risk.

The proposal, by Dr. Richard Schabas, Ontario's chief medical officer of health, has drawn hostile criticism from AIDS activists who say it endangers the public and could force the province to foot up thousands of people.

"This is absolutely outrageous," said Stephen Manning, executive director of the AIDS Committee of Toronto. "It's irresponsible, unscientific and deeply damaging."

"It would put thousands of people in this province in legal jeopardy and run public health officials and the police off the case."

With Wayne Brown, director of the Toronto PWA Group, with AIDS Foundation and Martin Johnson, executive director of

Casey House, a hospice for people with AIDS, have called for Schabas' resignation.

Schabas defended the proposal yesterday, saying it is an appropriate public health measure to prevent the spread of the disease.

"The risk of intercourse with someone who is infected, even when a condom is used, is known to be too high," he said in a phone interview. "Those who have intercourse with infected people are taking their lives in their hands."

Manning disputed his statement and pointed out that the Ontario health ministry has spent millions of dollars during the past year to use condoms during sex to avoid contracting the virus.

Ontario public health officials have the power to stop anyone from knowingly spreading the virus.

Local medical officers of health can order a carrier not to expose others, but they have no way to enforce the order, other than referring the case to police for

protection under the Criminal Code.

Schabas has recommended to Health Minister Elton Caplan that the province legislate "compulsory" disease under provincial law, allowing public health officials to ask the courts if they are five carriers to hospital if they are exposing others to the virus.

The court order would be reviewed after four months.

Caplan is travelling in India and could not be reached for comment.

More people had stated that Schabas hoped to confine only those low carriers who continue to have unprotected sex with partners who have no idea the person is infected.

But Schabas said yesterday that public health orders should be issued to anyone infected with the virus who continues to have any form of sexual intercourse.

His opinion is that the appropriate recommendation of order to someone known to be infected is not to have sexual intercourse.

DEMONSTRATE

MONDAY FEBRUARY 12
5:30pm
AT 519 CHURCH STREET



AIDS ACTION NOW!



AIDS Action Now! poster calling for a demonstration against Richard Schabas's attempt to quarantine HIV-positive people.

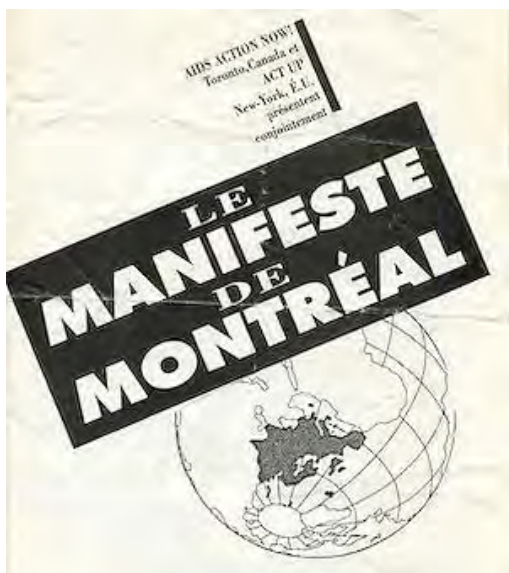
Despite the bleak picture painted here, where there is oppression, there is also resistance—including cultural resistance projects like *TLWA*. Greyson participated in the newly formed activist group AIDS ACTION NOW! (AAN!) in 1988, Toronto's answer to New York city's AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), a similar U.S. activist group founded just a year prior. In 1989 AIDS activists from all over the world, led by members of ACT UP/NYC, AAN!, and the Montreal-based Réaction-SIDA helped take over the opening ceremony of the Montreal V International AIDS Conference and led demonstrations all week long. [26] This watershed moment in AIDS activism, along with feminist health movement of the 1970s, helped solidify the now taken for granted axiom that people living with a disease are experts of their own experience and must be given the opportunity to take an active role in shaping both their own treatment and the broader fight against the disease. [27] In fact, it is this moment of storming the stage at the opening of the Montreal AIDS conference that begins Greyson's *The World is Sick (sic)* (1989), the first pilot episode in the *TLWA* series. On June 28, 1990, in the midst of *TLWA*'s production cycle, the Canadian government would finally release its first national AIDS strategy after years of intense pressure from AIDS activists across the country. [28]



Tim McCaskell opening the Fifth International AIDS Conference on behalf of people living with AIDS after activists stormed the stage of the opening ceremony captured in *The World is Sick (sic)*.



David Roche performing in news reporter drag before being taken hostage by activists in *The World is Sick (sic)*.



The *Montreal Manifesto* was the defining document to come out of the activist response to the Fifth International AIDS Conference.

It is in this urgent and everchanging socio-political context that all of the tapes contributed to the *TLWA* series must be analyzed. While I have done my utmost to provide clear context, the following textual analyses of the *TLWA* tapes assumes a reader with some basic knowledge of the AIDS crisis in Canada and is not intended as an introductory text—such resources are readily available for consultation online and in print. Analysis of the tapes is organized in groupings based on the video's genre or intended audience. First discussed are the journalistic documentary tapes in the series, followed by the closely related non-fiction tapes that take on the television talk show format. Next discussed are the tapes that provide unique insight into the daily lives of people living with HIV/AIDS and the challenges they face. Lastly, the education and outreach tapes that were produced with specific ethno-cultural communities in mind will be discussed, the largest grouping of tapes by far.

The documentary tapes

Greyson's pilot tape for the *TLWA* series entitled *The World is Sick (sic)* is a deliciously camp documentary focused on the historic activist interventions at the Montreal V International AIDS Conference hosted at the Palais des Congrès in 1989. Revered queer performance artist David Roche in middle-aged woman news reporter drag regularly pops up against green-screen projected footage of activists from AIDS ACTION NOW!, Réaction SIDA, and ACT UP New York City storming the convention centre. At one point she is even taken hostage by AIDS activists for her dismissive coverage of their protests and, as Greyson has described, she quickly succumbs to Stockholm Syndrome and becomes an advocate for their cause.[29] The result is an irreverent humorous running commentary on the failures of the conservative Mulroney government to address the AIDS crisis directly with much needed funding, research, and education, while also poking fun at television news conventions and disappointing coverage of activist events.

This documentary captures a number of important moments in the history of HIV/AIDS activism in Canada while also prioritizing the voices of grassroots activists from across the globe who travelled to Montreal for the conference. Talking head interviews with activists from the global south, people living with AIDS, and sex workers are interspersed between footage of activists seizing the opening ceremony stage to open the conference on behalf of people living with AIDS in Canada, the reading aloud of the *Montreal Manifesto* demanding the now accepted axiom that patients must have a central say in their treatment and care, and the planning of street demonstrations at the activist centre set up by Réaction SIDA.[30] Interestingly enough, the kind of sex worker activism captured by Greyson at the 1989 International AIDS Conference would also be inadvertently captured by Egyptian-Canadian filmmaker Tahani Rached in her National Film Board funded documentary *Médecins de Coeur* (1993) where she shadows Montreal doctor Réjean Thomas while he attends the Amsterdam VIII International AIDS Conference in 1992. It was at this conference that sex workers, including Canadian sex worker activists, launched the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, and their protests at the conference serve as a momentary backdrop in Rached's film.[31] George Stamos' 2016 documentary *Our Bodies Our Business* deals directly with the sex worker protests at the Montreal V International AIDS Conference by remixing archival footage from various people who documented the conference to create a beautiful collage of the vibrant and at times delightfully outrageous sex worker activism that took place in Montreal.

Stamos' *Our Bodies Our Business* is a playful supplement to *The World Is Sick (sic)* and gives greater voice to sex workers who are entirely absent from the *TLWA* series save a few scenes in Greyson's Montreal AIDS conference documentary.[32]



Sex workers protesting their exclusion from the proceedings at Eighth International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam captured in Rached's *Médecins de Coeur* (1993).



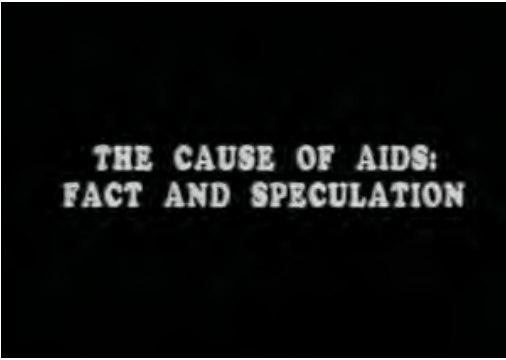
Our Bodies Our Business remixes many hours of raw documentary footage of the Fifth International AIDS Conference in Montreal to foreground the voices of sex workers who were there, including Danny Cockerline and Valerie Scott of the Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes.



The rambunctious antics of the Pink Block at the World Bank/International Monetary Fund in Prague capture in *Crowd Bites Wolf* (2001).

The spirit of Greyson's video also captures the growing ethos of what would become the global decentralized independent media movement a decade later when video production and editing would become even more widely accessible to average citizens. Indeed, *The World is Sick (sic)* presages many of the do-it-yourself activist documentaries that come out of the anti-/alter-globalization movement following the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle. The raucously funny hybrid documentary-spy thriller *Crowd Bites Wolf* (2000) that covers the 2000 World Bank Protests in Prague comes to mind most obviously. At this historical moment post-Seattle, "become the media" grew to be a central rallying cry for activists tired of being ignored or maligned by mainstream news reporting. A direct link, both aesthetically and politically, between Greyson's earlier work assembling *Angry Initiatives*, *Defiant Strategies* between 1988-1989 for the activist-oriented public access Deep Dish Television in New York City and *The World Is Sick (sic)* is evident.[33] Furthermore, the *TLWA* series itself follows the same logic as Deep Dish Television and its cousin Paper Tiger Television, democratizing the media by creating the conditions for the production of audiovisual content by underrepresented communities, in this case by those most at risk for contracting or already living with HIV/AIDS.

Colman Jones' *The Cause of AIDS: Fact & Speculation* most resembles traditional investigative longform journalism that Canadians would have already been seeing regularly broadcast on television through series like the CBC's *The Fifth Estate* (1975-present) and a few years after *TLWA* on *The Passionate Eye* (1992-present). While initially Jones' project began as a single half-hour episode for *TLWA*, Jones' continued his investigation resulting in a four-hour miniseries in itself. Jones' would go on to make another edit of all four tapes condensed down into a one-hour tape entitled *Lest We Forget: Syphilis in the AIDS Era* (1995). This *TLWA* contribution presents an overview of the debates about what causes AIDS, whether the syndrome is really caused by a new infectious agent like HIV or a series of co-factors like untreated latent syphilis and/or other bacterial and viral infections. The tapes include traditional talking head interviews with doctors and researchers alongside footage of their offices or laboratories adding to the credence of their claims. While some of these interviewees are certifiable denialists, people who claim HIV infection is benign and has nothing to do with



Title sequence for Colman Jones's contribution to TLWA entitled *The Cause of AIDS: Fact & Speculation*.

AIDS, others are HIV skeptics who take a critical approach to examining medical evidence about HIV. The latter would include AIDS activists like Michael Callen and Dr. Joseph Sonnabend, two of the three co-authors of the foundational safer sex document *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach* (1983). Callen and Sonnabend would continue to question the hypothesis that HIV was the sole infectious agent responsible for the onset of AIDS in a reasoned and cautious way that always centered on the health and well-being of people living with AIDS. Callen in particular was critical of one of the first seemingly useful drugs to treat HIV called AZT (azidothymidine) that in retrospect has been deemed lethally toxic, particularly at the dosage levels first prescribed to patients with HIV/AIDS. [34]

| | |
|---|---|
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| Dr. Joseph Sonnabend, a renowned scientist and HIV/AIDS researcher, is one of the many talking heads that populate <i>The Cause of AIDS</i> . | TLWA contributor Colman Jones speaking in direct address in <i>Lest We Forget: Syphilis in the AIDS Era</i> (1995). |

Unfortunately, Jones' tapes continue to be taken up by denialists who dangerously refuse to deal with the reality that HIV is far from benign and that there is a general consensus in the scientific community that HIV causes AIDS. Equally unfortunate, however, is the inability to differentiate the reasoned questioning of Western medical epistemologies taken up by Jones, Callen, and others, from the dangerous denialism that continues today with Canadian Brent Leung's AIDS conspiracy theory documentary *House of Numbers* from 2009. [35] Even after TLWA concluded Greyson saw the importance of this openness to critically challenging the medical establishment by including Michael Callen as "Miss HIV" in his 1993 AIDS musical *Zero Patience* and giving airtime to Callen's controversial multifactorial thesis. While from today's vantage point it might be easy to dismiss skeptics and denialists alike, it was the radical approach to challenging the expertise of Western medical science that propelled much of the AIDS activist movement forward. Skeptics rightfully questioned drug trial protocols, unconvincing scientific evidence, and demanded patients play a central role in understanding and deciding their own treatment options. This history, evidenced in Jones' TLWA contribution, should not be completely dismissed alongside denialist claims, but included in its own right as part of a complex collective AIDS activist history.



Film poster for the largely derided 2009 AIDS denialist film *House of Number: Anatomy of an Epidemic* by Canadian documentary maker Brent Leung.

How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach

The pioneering safer sex document *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach* created by Michael Callen and Richard Berkowitz in collaboration with Dr. Joseph Sonnabend.



Michael Callen performing as Miss HIV in Greyson's 1993 AIDS musical *Zero Patience*

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The talk shows



The title sequence for *TLWA* that features the drab early '90s skyline of Toronto only appears on *The Great AZT Debate* tape.



The talk show set fashioning of *The Great AZT Debate*.

The Great AZT Debate opens with a *TLWA* series intro reel with scenes of Toronto's skyline played against footage of activists marching in the streets while the letters T, L, W, A, and eventually the series full title appear on screen. As the second of two pilot episodes, this series introduction reel was likely created specifically for this tape, but was not taken up across the rest of the tapes in the series. After the series intro, the tape begins like a game show, complete with a host, giant spinning wheel, and a Vanna White-like character. The tape quickly transitions from game show formalities into a roundtable talk show format with intertitles about the history and development of AZT to facilitate the shift. Following this, *TLWA* series producer Michael Balser appears on screen before the talk show's set discussing his experience taking a high dose of AZT and how sick it made him. The camera then pans to a group of four men, Wayne Boone, Rob Flack, Colman Jones, and Tim McCaskell, sitting in armchairs discussing the merits and consequences of AZT for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Wayne Boone, a gay doctor and member of the HIV Primary Care Physicians Group, was previously involved in anti-censorship activism at Glad Day Books in the 1980s.[36] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) At the time of this tape's production he was running a family practice primarily serving gay men. Dr. Boone also spoke at AIDS ACTION NOW!'s first press conference on January 26, 1988 blasting the healthcare system as inadequate and uncoordinated in the absence of a national AIDS strategy.[37] His contribution to the conversation on this tape largely concerns the ethical question of how and when to provide a drug to patients that ask for it despite having concerns about AZT's toxicity. Colman Jones, AIDS activist, journalist, and *TLWA* contributor also shares concerns about the effectiveness and toxicity of AZT. Jones describes how the overemphasis on AZT as a treatment for people living with AIDS has taken some of the pressure off the government and private sector to develop safer and more effective medications to treat AIDS. Rob Flack (1957-1993) an artist and HIV-positive gay man describes his decision to not take AZT after he was diagnosed and encouraged to take it by his primary care physician despite still being healthy. Only months later does he try it in combination with other naturopathic treatments, but still he notes side effects of sluggishness and depression. Tim McCaskell, an HIV-positive gay man and activist with AIDS ACTION NOW! who played a central role in storming the stage at the 1989 AIDS conference in Montreal, explains in detail his decision not to take AZT. This is in spite of the fact that McCaskell recognizes that the drug does provide an important glimmer of hope as a life-prolonging treatment for people living with AIDS. McCaskell goes on to describes the mass confusion among people living with AIDS as whether or not to take AZT, noting that solely relying on a T-cell count is a bad indicator as to when AZT should be taken.

The video then moves to an interior direct-address interview with Calgary-born Ross Laycock (1959-1991), a gay artist living in the U.S. and the partner/muse of the revered Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996).[38] Laycock, with Kaposi Sarcoma lesions visible on his face, describes his relatively positive experience with AZT, but encourages viewers to take control of their health and do everything to increase their overall wellness in addition to taking prescribed drugs. The direct address then turns into an almost poetic reading of acronyms Laycock associates with the disease, from television station call signs



Ross Laycock reading the acronyms for HIV treatments and opportunistic infections that fill the screen alongside him.

and university abbreviations, to opportunistic infections and the drugs that treat them. This reading is paired with rudimentary computer-generated text on screen spelling out various acronyms, quickly busying the screen to demonstrate how difficult it is to understand and keep track of the latest treatment information. The video then returns to the show's on-set host who reminds viewers that "The more control you take over your own life and health, the closer you come to winning on The Great AZT Debate!"

Marc Bérubé & Steve Walker's ***AIDS: A Family Affair*** opens and closes with somber melodramatic classical music and a dramatically lit close up shot of two pairs of hands reaching out and grasping one another. This opening sets the earnest tone that is maintained throughout the tape by the show's host Steve Walker. After a short montage of clips from interviewees featured throughout the tape, the video switches to a short direct address by the host Steve Walker who provides a framework for the group interviews with families, caregivers, and partners of PLWAs, both alive and deceased, as well a few PLWAs themselves, that follow. Walker makes emphatically clear that HIV/AIDS is an issue that not only affects people with the virus, but also their family of origin, partners, and friends. Furthermore, Walker notes that gay people have been hit hardest by the epidemic in Canada and often face struggles with their families of origin because of the disease in addition to their sexuality. The interviewees from the tape are lauded as heroes, fiercely fighting stigma, government neglect, medical mistreatment, all while caring for one another.



The talk show set fashioning of *AIDS: A Family Affair*.

The visual aesthetics of the tape match that of other low-budget interview talk show conventions where guests sit across from the interviewer with a dabbling of potted office plants adding a homey texture to otherwise sparsely decorated set. At one point we even see the face of a man surreptitiously poking out from behind a poorly hung black curtain behind the show's host, but clearly there was no time or budget for a second take. The content of the interviews takes precedent over so-called "broadcast quality" aesthetics, but the tape still makes a strong commitment to talk show conventions in order to engage audiences in a familiar format about a topic often sensationalized in televisual media at the time.



The onscreen host of *AIDS: A Family Affair*, Steve Walker, appears in direct address between interviews.



Interview with members of the Bender Family in *AIDS: A Family Affair*.

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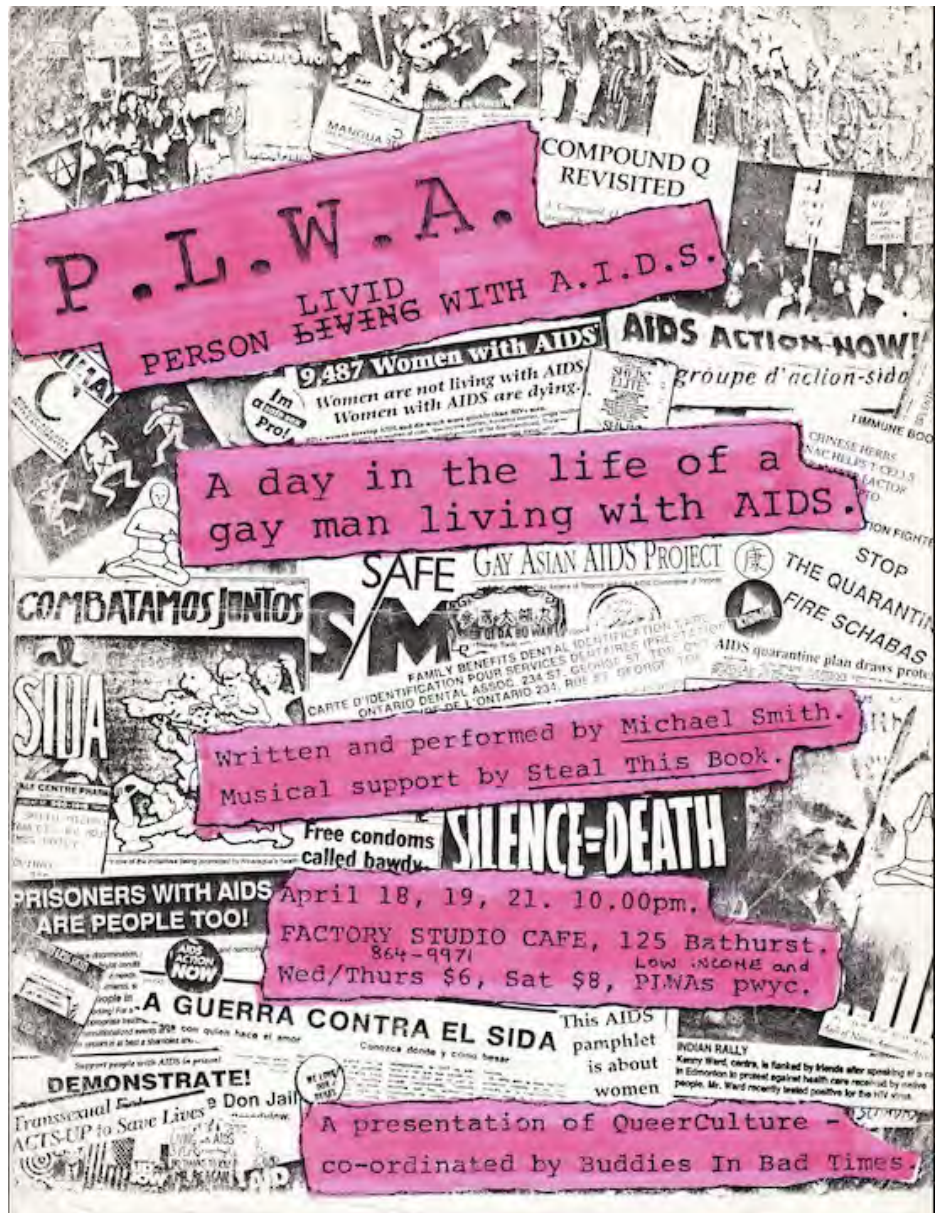


The pedagogy of *Philadelphia* where the presumed heterosexual audience is instructed in the proper way to treat their gay and HIV-positive family members.

Walker's group interviews with families of PLWAs are touching. The Bender family discusses how they care for and support their son/brother who is living with AIDS. The family is an on-screen demonstration of the care and compassion that should be exhibited by all parents and siblings, but they acknowledge this is not the case for many young gay men living with the disease. This is echoed by caregivers who provide support services and palliative care for PLWAs, support that families of origin all too often refuse to give to their gay sons/brothers. Interestingly, the same on-screen strategy would be adopted in *Philadelphia* (1993), one of the first wide release Hollywood films to make HIV/AIDS its focus, where straight audience are instructed in the proper ways to support and care for their gay sons/brothers through the film's narrative.[39] A lesbian support counselor from the AIDS Committee of Toronto goes even further than the families interviewed to describe the AIDS crisis as a Holocaust, noting the traumatic experience of losing multiple friends in a short period of time with little sympathy and support for the dead and those that care for them. This genocide metaphor is repeated by host Steve Walker in the show's closing monolog, but is curiously absent from most cultural production about HIV/AIDS in Canada.[40]

This tape makes its viewers witness to the tragedy of the AIDS crisis while also providing instructive examples of how to care for PLWAs whether they are members of your family of origin, lovers, friends, or acquaintances. The tape humanizes PLWAs, showing how they can and should be loved and cared for by partners and families despite the double stigma of the disease and their sexual identities. While the somber opening and direct address by the show's host may seem overly earnest and dour, taken in historical context it cuts through the rampant homophobia and serophobia amplified in televisual media at the time.

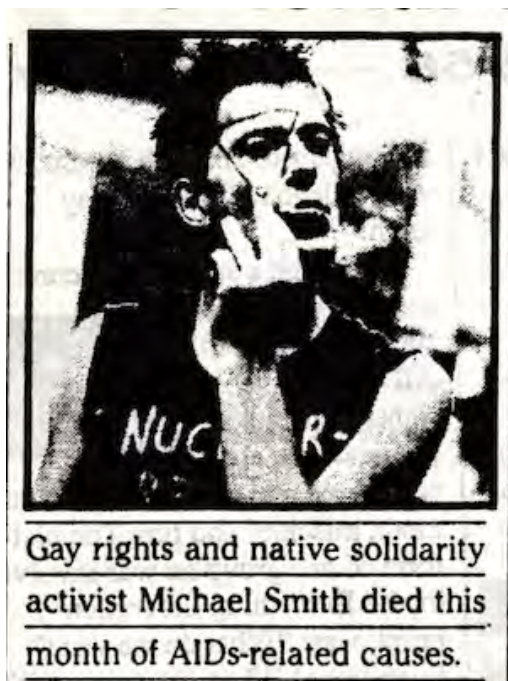
The PLWA tapes



Original poster for Michael Smith's theatrical production *Person Livid With AIDS: A Day in the Life of a Gay Man Living with AIDS* in 1990.

Michael Smith's 1990 one-man show with occasional musical accompaniments was performed as part of the QueerCulture Festival organized by Buddies in Bad Times before Buddies became the anchored Toronto institution it is today.

Person Livid With AIDS: A Day in the Life of a Gay Man Living with AIDS (PLWA), which had a three day run at the Factory Studio Café at Bathurst and Adelaide (a precursor to today's Factory Theatre), was also captured on a grainy video tape that resurfaced through the efforts of British Columbia-based sex worker activist Andy Sorfleet. The tape was found in the estate of deceased Toronto lesbian activist Chris Bearchell (1953-2007) who had retired to the Gulf



[Click here to see obituary for Michael Smith after his death in February 1991.](#)



Smith standing on stage describing all the pills he takes in *Person Livid With AIDS*.



Smith standing naked on stage letting out an anguished scream at then Minister of Health Perrin Beatty.

Islands of British Columbia.[41] While the production would be restaged in early 1991 as a fundraiser for AIDS ACTION NOW! and Gays & Lesbians of the First Nations,[42] this performance documentation, along with an accompanying publicity poster and 'zine, is primarily what remains of Smith's original play. Whether or not a thirty-minute cut of the performance documentation was ever made for airing on *TLWA* is unclear as Smith was quite ill during the series' production and died in February 5, 1991 just weeks before the series was cancelled.[43]

Smith, a British transplant, was a well-known queer Toronto anarchist whose activist work extended well beyond HIV/AIDS activism. He was organizing with AIDS ACTION NOW! (AAN!) since its emergence in the late 1980s and was instrumental in laying the groundwork for what would later become the Prisoners' AIDS Support Action Network (PASAN) as a member of AAN!'s prisoner subcommittee. Smith was remembered in memorial in AIDS ACTION NOW!'s newsletter as a defender of not only gay rights and rights of people living with HIV/AIDS, but also of women's rights, Indigenous people's rights, and animal rights. He is also remembered fondly in the oral histories recorded by the AIDS Activist History Project as a member of the anarchist urban homestead collective Cathedral B and a member of the radical faeries, an international queer anti-establishment counterculture that embraces spiritualism over the commercialism and misogyny of mainstream gay culture.[44]

It's worth noting a number of aspects of the production to situate it within a broader genealogy of cultural resistance. Most obvious is the instructive nature of *PLWA*, fitting into the long tradition of Brechtian theatre that aims to educate its audience.[45] Smith instructs his audience in safer sex practices and offers a testimonial snapshot into what a day in the life of a person living with AIDS might look like. From demonstrating the quotidian yet irksome tasks of scheduling multiple doctor's appointments a day and swallowing pills every few hours, to the emotional devastation wrought by stigma, government neglect, and the spectre of an early death. Smith also goes further, exhibiting an intersectional HIV/AIDS politics that acknowledges and analyzes Smith's own privileges in society as a white gay man with AIDS from a middle-class family while also foregrounding the concerns of women, Indigenous people, drug users, poor people, homeless and unhoused people, and prisoners affected by HIV/AIDS. This demonstration of intersectional politics foreshadows the coming political schisms that would fracture AIDS activist organizations in the United States, and to a lesser degree in Canada, in the early 1990s.[46]

Aspects of Smith's production can also be understood as therapeutic. While drama therapy now occupies a place within the walls of research institutes and universities, activist cultural interventions precede the academic interest by decades. Smith's vignette where he delivers an angry diatribe to a mannequin onto which he projects the personhood of then Minister of National Health and Welfare Perrin Beatty, concludes with an emphatic "Fuck off asshole!" and a long scream. This cathartic release, accompanied by a complete disrobing in order to "unleash the naked truth," is met with whoops and clapping from the audience. This cathartic release shared between Smith and the audience in the imagined verbal take down of a callous politician makes obvious that those occupying the theatre's seats are likely friends and fellow activists equally fed up with government inaction on HIV/AIDS.



Pedro Zamora from season three of *The Real World* set in San Francisco in 1994 lived his life in public and pedagogically much like Michael Smith did.

Smith's performance of self for others is also of interest in *PLWA*. Following the theoretical work of the late performance studies scholar José Muñoz on the ethics of self and working on the self for others, Smith's production provides a striking example on what a performance of self for others could look like in the Canadian context.[47] While Muñoz's work focuses on the public performance of self by AIDS activist and reality TV personality Pedro Zamora from *The Real World: San Francisco* (1994), Smith's performance of self runs parallel. In *PLWA* Smith performs as himself, taking different parts of his lived experience and stitching them together into a digestible hour and a half production. Smith's performance of self is a testimony to his lived experience and activism at the height of the AIDS crisis, sacrificing his privacy to demonstrate his reality and his intersectional political response to a broader public. A public that was not only reached through this live theatrical experience, but also through a thirty-minute condensed version that was purportedly produced for *TLWA*[48]. Smith would also do a number of additional abbreviated performances while touring the United States with the Emma Goldman Gypsy Players, a precursor to the radical faerie theatre troupe the Eggplant Faerie Players that still exists today.[49] This group would later script their own version of *PLWA* in the United States based on the life story of a close friend of Smith's named SPREE who was inspired by Smith's work.[50]

The Medicine Show is more easily classifiable as a video art tape than the rest of the *TLWA* contributions and in fact is the only tape to acknowledge additional funding secured from the Canada Council for the Arts in its closing credits. The video utilizes narrative storytelling, mock interviews, and staged theatrical vignettes to create a satirical portrait of a day in the life of an HIV-positive gay man named Gregory performed by co-author of the tape Gregory Wight (1960-1990). Wight's co-author James MacSwain would go on to become a renowned figure in the Halifax arts community, teaching at NSCAD, and producing another short video on HIV/AIDS entitled *The Executor* (1996) in collaboration with video artist James Shedden. Newfoundland-born Wight and MacSwain met in Halifax as part of the emerging gay arts scene and before Wight left for greater opportunities in Toronto. MacSwain would join Wight shortly after learning of his HIV-positive diagnosis in order to support him as part of an extended care team made up of friends.[51]

The Medicine Show begins with a well-dressed street fair huckster selling all sorts of lotions and potions from his wagon to a gullible crowd of onlookers. The scene is set with a monolog from the huckster promising to fix everyone's aches, pains, and illnesses while a crowd cheers along enthusiastically. The huckster is the satirical embodiment of companies producing and marketing anti-retroviral drugs like AZT, but alternative medicines are also skewered. Theatrical interludes featuring the huckster appear throughout the video to punctuate the video's critique of the conflicting information about and pressure to take either or both western and alternative medicines to treat HIV/AIDS.



Gregory Wight, co-creator of the *TLWA*



Gregory Wight also plays himself, a person

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| entitled <i>The Medicine Show</i> , first appears as the video's huckster medicine man selling you whatever you'd buy | living with AIDS, navigating all the treatment advice including claims from friends about junk alternate therapies like the gemstones sold in the store behind him. |

Huckster aside, the video primarily revolves around the life of Gregory, a recently diagnosed HIV-positive gay man in Toronto. The video follows Gregory as he tries to navigate a world where his friends, community organizers, and doctors encourage him to take various medical treatments, from swallowing large doses of AZT to carrying around a satchel of healing crystals. The lampooning of alternative therapies exemplifies the desperation for some sense of control over one's life and health in the days before effective treatments, a desperation most vividly displayed a short time later in the 1993 American documentary *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* where a couple on the cusp of death from AIDS-related illnesses undergo intensive Reiki treatments.

Interspersed between direct address monologs where Gregory reflects on his treatment options are various staged interviews with friends and co-workers



This deeply uncomfortable scene from *A Silverlake Life* shows filmmaker Tom Joslin receiving Reiki treatment while he is quickly deteriorating from AIDS-related illnesses with no effective treatments yet available.

whose well-meaning dialogues demonstrate the pressures on the main character to choose certain treatment options. Much like Michael Smith's *PLWA*, Gregory outlines all the treatment steps he must take on daily basis in front of a table full of pill bottles, how the drugs affect him, and how often he has to get blood transfusions or go to doctor for tests. The task of weighing treatment options as well as actually taking the treatments is clearly onerous, and in Gregory's closing direct address he notes that this all comes on top of trying to live his life and maintain a job. Again, like Smith's *PLWA*, *The Medicine Show* imagines an audience that will understand the satire and jokes throughout the tape, making it part of an in-group conversation amongst the HIV/AIDS affected queer community.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The education & outreach tapes



The opening scene of *anOther Love Story: Women and AIDS* where viewer watch the morning rush of an inter-racial lesbian couple mirrors that of the film *Working Girls* by Lizzie Borden from 1986.

While most of the tapes in the *TLWA* series went out of circulation a few years after their broadcast debut, nearly all of the culturally specific outreach tapes remained in circulation save the Indigenous tape *Nibo' Apinewin*. These tapes would go on to be programmed in queer film festivals, utilized in community screenings and education projects, and purchased by the National AIDS Clearinghouse in Ottawa, a project of the Public Health Agency of Canada. [52] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) That these tapes were being funded through Canadian health agencies and then purchased by other Canadian health agencies for screening and distribution only illuminates how absurd the censorship controversy at Rogers Cable was at the time. This grouping of tapes would be described by social workers today as culturally and linguistically competent, non-profit lingo for tapes that were designed for and by specific ethno-cultural communities by using the vernacular and cultural cues of the communities these tapes were intended to reach.

Debbie Douglas and Gabriella Micallef's (1960-2011) *anOther Love Story: Women and AIDS* begins with an opening scene that mirrors Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986). In both productions a lesbian interracial couple is waking up in bed in the early morning with one eventually rushing to get up and out the door. In *anOther Love Story*, the young woman rushing out the door is headed to a doctor's appointment to do get her HIV test while in *Working Girls* (1986) the main character cycles off to work at a brothel. The heavily scripted dramatic narrative built around the couple's relationship in *anOther Love Story* structures the video that illustrates the issues facing women, lesbians and racialized women in particular, in regards to HIV/AIDS. The storyline primarily revolves around a conflict between the two lovers in the video's opening sequence when one of them withdraws from the relationship after being encouraged to take an HIV test by her doctor. The tension resolves when one of the other women in the social world of the couple comes out as HIV-positive to the serophobic half of the couple after which she seeks counselling and safer sex information from none other than Douglas Stewart who in real life would go on to become the Executive Director of the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (Black CAP). The video concludes by showing the inhabitants of *anOther Love Story's* world attending a safer sex workshop during which intertitles with facts about women and HIV in Canada flash on screen. The parting shot portrays the initial inter-racial couple back together again, playful pulling at the corners of a dental damn as they passionately embrace.



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| <p><i>anOther Love Story's</i> social world is filled by queers of color and women of color from Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention activist Doug Stewart on TV to the women just hanging out on the corner.</p> | |

Of particular note, *anOther Love Story* was the first tape co-authored by a Black woman video maker to address HIV/AIDS among African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) women. The ensemble cast of lesbians, most of whom are racialized, in *anOther Love Story* exist in a world primarily populated with people like them. Their social worlds, the bar, the pool hall, one another's living rooms, even the television that is turned on throughout the video features a cast of activists conveying information about HIV/AIDS in racialized communities. While clearly within the realm of magical realism, this tape is also a worldmaking project where women, racialized and lesbian, can access unbiased judgement free information and services that they need to stay educated, healthy, and able to support one another without the very real-world consequences of racism, xenophobia, and heterosexism. *anOther Love Story* also serves as an antecedent to Quebec filmmaker Anne Golden's 1991 documentary *Les Autres/Women and AIDS* that, while a non-fiction documentary work, features many of the same episodic vignettes that appear in the fictional world created by Douglas and Micallef.

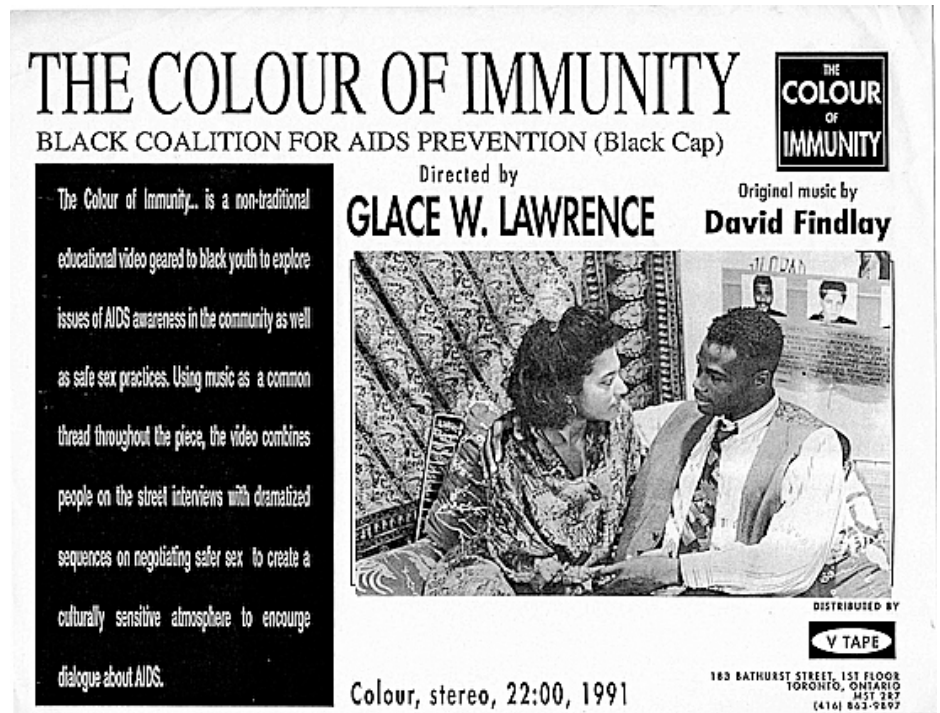


Anne Golden's *Les Autres/Women and AIDS* takes up many of same issues and aesthetics of *anOther Love Story*, but through documentary format and in Quebecois French.

anOther Love Story is still in distribution and continues to be screened to this day due to its ground-breaking narrative representation of ACB women and lesbians. It was featured at an encore screening in Montreal for the 10th edition of Massimadi in 2019 as well as part of a MediaQueer organized program at InsideOut Ottawa and RIDM both in 2018. Debbie Douglas would go on to become the Executive Director of Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) where she continues her activism while her partner and collaborator Gabriella would pass away from lung cancer in 2011.

The work of the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (Black CAP) in Toronto has been traced in numerous oral history transcripts recorded at the AIDS Activist History Project. Douglas Stewart and Dionne Falconer, the first two Executive Directors of the organization, tell the origin and history of Black CAP's emergence from the AIDS Committee of Toronto and the Toronto African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) organizing milieu connected to ZAMI in the late 1980s. ***The Colour***

of Immunity was an early prevention video created by Glace Lawrence and Black CAP (with original music from David Findlay) for the *TLWA* series. According to Lawrence, this video was the first HIV/AIDS-themed video produced exclusively for and by ACB communities in Canada.



Publicity poster for the *TLWA* tape *The Colour of Immunity*

Lawrence recounts getting involved in this video project as a member of Trinity Square Video (TSV), the artist run centre Michael Balser and John Greyson were launching the *TLWA* series from. Although she noted her memory was a bit fuzzy when interviewed, her presence at TSV and the fact that she completed her first film in 1989 made her a natural fit for the project. In discussing the video's life beyond the *TLWA* series and how Black CAP used the tape, she recalls,

“Initially when it was made there were a few public screenings. One of them was at Harbourfront Centre, and at the Ontario Black History Society. I suspect that the latter was due to the fact that I used to work at the Society. Then it was used in HIV prevention workshops at Black CAP. It was geared to the ‘MTV’ audience. They wanted content that would engage youth of the MTV generation.”[53]



The Black heterosexual family at the center of

Elaborating, Glace notes that while *The Colour of Immunity* was explicitly youth oriented, there was indeed another production that Black CAP was involved with after her video. She recalls, “*Survivors* (1992), was more family oriented. It was financed through Black CAP via private funding and director/producer Alfons Adetuyi helped develop the proposal. Prior to that time, there weren’t any Canadian-based productions that focused on the Black and Caribbean experience locally.”[54]

The Colour of Immunity mixes scenes of Black CAP outreach workers strolling

Canadian film maker Alfons Adetuyi's featurette *Survivors*.

through the Caribana street festival and Regent Park's Blocko in safer sex t-shirts handing out condoms, street-based interviews with ACB Torontonians, and scripted vignettes where a young ACB heterosexual couple discuss safer sex and negotiate condom use in direct unpretentious language. Occasional voiceovers provide basic facts and figures regarding HIV/AIDS in Canada, routes of transmission, myths about who the epidemic affects, prevention strategies, and the importance of condom usage in particular. It is of note that the voiceovers and these vignettes offer empowering and instructive safer sex information particularly targeted to heterosexual ACB women.



The Colour of Immunity utilizes on the street documentary aesthetics throughout the video, starting with Black CAP outreach workers at Toronto cultural festivals.



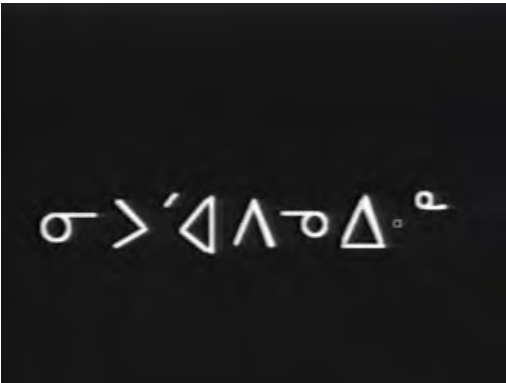
A series of vignettes featuring a young black heterosexual couple demonstrate healthy relationships, communication, and safer sex. These vignettes punctuate the documentary style backbone of *The Colour of Immunity*.



Dione Falconer, former executive director of Black CAP, is one of the many talking heads in Alison Duke's short documentary *Black CAP Then and Now*

While the recently outgoing Executive Director at Black CAP Shannon Ryan was unaware of *The Colour of Immunity's* existence or that it was still in distribution at Vtape, Black CAP continues to use video to help promote its work, tell its own story, and fight the ongoing AIDS epidemic. Black CAP's twenty-minute twentieth anniversary video produced by Toronto documentarian Alison Duke *Black CAP Then and Now* (2015) reflects on twenty years of activism and services provided under the Black CAP banner. Since distribution models have significantly changed since *The Colour of Immunity* premiered on cable broadcast through the *TLWA* series, *Black CAP Then and Now* is in distribution for free on YouTube.

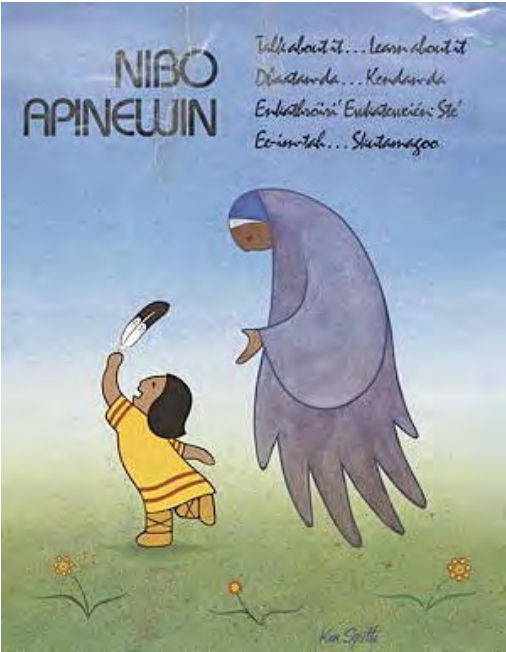
Non-Indigenous ally Ted Myerscough co-authored a crucial and ground-breaking Indigenous-focused contribution to the *TLWA* series with Anishnawbe Health entitled *Nibo' Apinewin*. The tape was shot on-reserve in Neyaashiinigmiing, formerly called Cape Corker, and was one of many health-focused Indigenous educational tapes Myerscough worked on with Anishnawbe Health.[55] The tape's Ojibwe language title appears on screen using the Latin alphabet and translates into English as "Deadly Disease". This is followed shortly thereafter by the title written in Cree syllabics, although the tape's dialog carries on exclusively in English. The tape would go on to be distributed as a trusted resource through The Assembly of First Nations,[56] as well as featured in ImagineNATIVE screenings and distribution catalogues throughout the 1990s.[57] Anishnawbe Health would also go on to produce a complementary full-colour educational poster with the same title and shares the core themes of the video. The poster also doubles as an advertisement for the distribution of the video directly from Anishnawbe Health. [58]



The *TLWA* tape *Nibo' Apinewin* has a title sequence that uniquely appears in both English



and Cree Syllabics.



Nibo' Apinewin promotional poster designed by Ken Syrette. [Click here to see full poster.](#)



Toronto-born Cree elder and American Indian Movement activist Vern Harper appears in Keewaywin alongside an Indigenous youth.



An interview with Ojibway elder Verna Johnson from Chippewas of Nawash shot on reserve on the Bruce Peninsula in Ontario provides the structure for Nibo' Apinewin.



Additional group interviews appear throughout Nibo' Apinewin.

This tape situates HIV/AIDS within the cultural and historic context of settler-colonialism, genocide, and Indigenous people's glaring health deficits within the Canadian state. The tape heavily features Ojibwe elder Verna Johnston who provides the basic facts of HIV/AIDS through direct address to the camera supplemented by on-screen intertitles spelling out the acronyms AIDS and HIV. Unlike other tapes in the *TLWA* series targeting ethno-cultural communities, *Nibo' Apinewin* foregrounds heterosexual Indigenous women and their babies as well as Indigenous people who use injection drugs to the exclusion of gay men and two-spirit people within Indigenous communities. The tape's preoccupation is that all Indigenous people are at risk, not just white settlers and gay men, and that Indigenous people need to learn how to protect themselves. In light of today's continuing HIV/AIDS crisis within Indigenous communities in Canada, particularly in the prairies where HIV is spread most commonly through shared needles and heterosexual sex, the message of this tape unfortunately continues to be devastatingly relevant. [59]

The tape is also instructive in its demand for Indigenous people to be cared for within community, allowing space for traditional medicines and healing practices in addition to western medical treatments. Numerous interviewees express concern about the necessity to leave the reserve for treatment, into medical facilities far from home and ignorant of Indigenous customs and healing practices that emphasize collective intra-community care. The result often leads to HIV-positive Indigenous people dying alone in the absence of family and community supports.

This ground-breaking tape was released the same year as *Keewaywin: AIDS in the First Nations*, an Indigenous HIV-focused tape created by Thunder Gay Magazine producer Doug Broman and the AIDS Committee of Thunder Bay that also screened on community cable television. The tape was shot on-reserve at Lake Helen Reserve just outside Thunder Bay and features Toronto-born Cree elder Vern Harper as the tape's narrator and strikingly handsome Manitoba-born Cree actor Billy Merasty as the tape's protagonist. Unlike *Nibo' Apinewin*'s more chaste heterosexual approach to HIV/AIDS, this tape was made to tackle homophobia and HIV/AIDS together by encouraging Indigenous people to embrace their gay and 2-spirit brothers who have moved off-reserve and to show compassion to those of them who were returning to their communities of origin with HIV and/or AIDS.





Cree actor Bill Merasty appears outside the airport as a young Indigenous man returning to the reserve.



Billy Merasty speaking exclusively in Swampy Cree appears in the AIDS education video *Nipoo Aspiniwin* that aired on community cable stations in Winnipeg, Manitoba.



The title sequence from Richard Fung's contribution to TLWA entitled *Fighting Chance*.



A clip of Fung's 1984 tape *Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Asians* appears at the outset of *Fighting Chance*.

TLWA's *Nibo' Apinewin* also influenced another group to make Indigenous-focused HIV/AIDS education and outreach tape for cable broadcast. The Winnipeg Gay Media Collective (1980-1993) produced a similarly titled tape in collaboration with the Nichiwakan Native Gay Society, *Nipoo Aspiniwin* (1991). [60] This tape was distributed on Manitoba community cable channels through the program *Coming Out!* in the same manner as the TLWA-produced tapes were broadcast in Toronto. This Winnipeg-made tape is markedly different from *Nibo' Apinewin* however, in that the entire tape's dialog is delivered by Billy Merasty in Swampy Cree as opposed to English. In this tape Merasty discusses the basics of HIV/AIDS through direct address to the camera and then turns to safer sex practices and native resources, demonstrating the use of a condom by rolling it down his index finger. Merasty would go on to become a prolific film and television actor and in 2010 was awarded the Manitoba Order of the Buffalo Hunt, the highest honour bestowed by the Provincial Government of the province at the time. [61] The afterlife of this tape is less clear, but its appearance just one year after the TLWA-produced tape with the same name speaks to the important use of video to do popular education and reach Indigenous communities with content made by and for them as the HIV/AIDS epidemic continued to grow unabated.

Richard Fung who authored *Fighting Chance* for TLWA was perhaps the only video artist involved in the series besides Greyson who had previous experience working in community television. [62] Fung's video contribution builds off his previous documentary work profiling the gay Asian community of Toronto in his first documentary *Orientations* (1985). As Fung notes in the opening sequence of *Fighting Chance*, *Orientations* did not include content about HIV/AIDS in the gay Asian community because at that time he did not know anyone who was out as HIV-positive. This caveat becomes the driving force behind the talking head documentary about queer Asian PLWAs in North America he contributed to TLWA.

In *Fighting Chance* Fung interviews a number of out HIV-positive gay Asian men in the U.S. and Canada about their challenges living with the virus. While the video appears to be ambitiously shot in five cities, Toronto, Vancouver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Boston, all the American interviews were shot in San Francisco alone while Fung was visiting the city as a guest lecturer at a local university. [63] These straightforward talking head interviews introduce viewers to gay Asian men surviving and thriving with the virus, thereby humanizing them. The interviews also take place exclusively outside amongst nature, making them intentionally public, vibrant, and teeming with life. This outdoor strategy mimics British video maker Stuart Marshall's influential early AIDS tape *Bright Eyes* (1984) where he ends his video with American PLWA Michael Callen directly

addressing the camera in an extended scene while sitting in the middle of a luscious green gardenscape.



Fung purposely shot interviews with gay Asian men living with AIDS outside to match the aesthetic of Stuart Marshall's interview with PLWA activist Michael Callen in his film *Bright Eyes* (1984).



A number of ritualistic vignettes, like folding decorative origami papers, are interspersed among the outdoor interviews in *Fighting Chance*.

One of the ritualistic vignettes is a sweet and sensual communal shower washing scene that raised the ire of cable station manager Ed Nassello despite the lack of any sex or frontal nudity.

The interviews are punctuated by three interior-shot ritualized vignettes with poetic voiceover: a man ceremoniously folding and burning decorative papers, a communal shower scene where men wash each other, and a naked man slowly picking petals from a daisy. These scenes, argues Thomas Waugh, are not as fixed to the specific urban locations that are attached to each interviewee making it readable and relevant outside of these cities.[64] Also included amongst the non-interview footage in the tape are scenes from demonstrations at the VI International Conference on AIDS that also took place in San Francisco in 1990 one year after the tumultuous V International Conference on AIDS in Montreal in 1989—again documented in Greyson's *TLWA* pilot tape *The World is Sick (sic)*. These demonstrations captured by Fung's roving camera illuminate a particular historic moment in the HIV/AIDS activist movement that, in the words of one interviewee, for the first time actively included Asian and Pacific Islander communities.



Protest footage of the Sixth International AIDS Conference in 1990 in San Francisco that appears in Fung's *Fighting Chance*.

As noted previously, Fung's inclusion of the communal shower scene where two men gently scrub another man's back raised the ire of Rogers Cable station manager Ed Nasello. One could only imagine the difficulty faced by *TLWA* had they tried to broadcast Fung's other 1990 HIV/AIDS tape, a GMHC/AIDS Committee of Toronto jointly commissioned safer sex public service



Title sequence for Fung's safer sex public service announcement entitled *Steam Clean* produced by the AIDS Committee of Toronto and New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis.

announcement entitled *Steam Clean*. This three and a half minute video features a cruisey scene unfolding between two Asian men in the same Toronto bathhouse where Fung shot the offending communal shower scene in *Fighting Chance*—except this time the intimacy between men would be explicit and feature close-up shots of condoms and lubricant in action.[65] Fung would go on to continue making tapes about sexuality, Asian identity, and HIV, most notably his much celebrated autobiographical short *Sea in the Blood* (2000).

Kaspar Saxena and Ian Rashid's ***Bolo! Bolo!*** is the tape in the *TLWA* series that has garnered the most attention from scholars and critics including Thomas Waugh, Kim Tomczak, Tom Folland, Cindy Patton, and even Michael Balser himself.[66] This attention primarily focuses on the tape's censorship by Rogers cable that, as mentioned previously, effectively ended the *TLWA* series. Having discussed the impact of both the tape's and series' censorship previously, the discussion of *Bolo! Bolo!* here will focus on the tape itself in order to centre the tape's content and message over the censorship battle that largely overshadowed it.



Seeking out a partner cruising the bath house in Fung's *Steam Clean*.



Explicit demonstration of how to use a condom between two Asian men hooking up at a bathhouse.



Footage from *Bolo! Bolo!* documenting early group discussions of the newly formed Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP).



Bolo! Bolo! featured interviews with Bengali-Canadian intellectuals like Himani Bannerji and her daughter Kaushalya who was the first staff person at ASAAP.

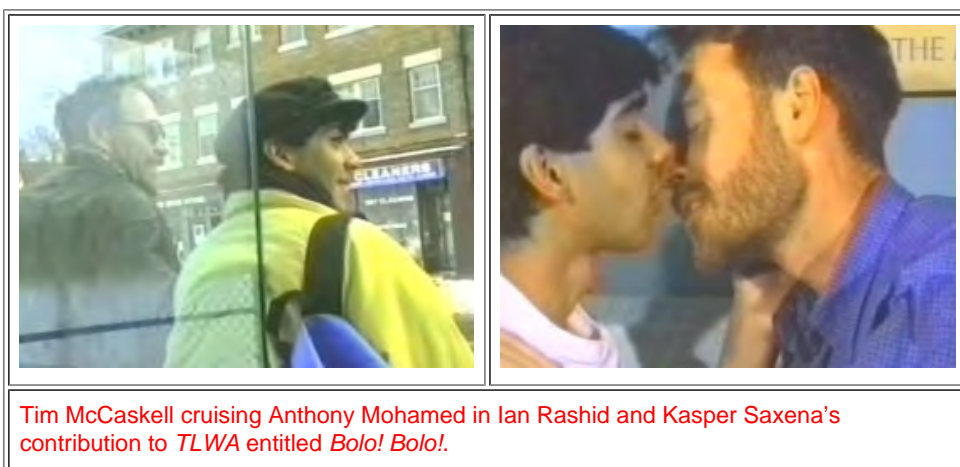
Originally titled *Silence x Silence = Death2*, *Bolo! Bolo!* was intended to be the first of a two tapes.[67] The first tape, generally following documentary conventions, would be targeted at straight South Asians in need of culturally relevant HIV/AIDS education. The second tape targeted at gay and lesbian South Asians was going to be experimental and structured as a visual poem. With the censorship controversy, the second tape with would never be made. Structurally, *Bolo! Bolo!* most resembles Black CAP's *The Colour of Immunity* where culturally specific music and street festival scenes segue between interviews and narrative



Poster advertising the premiere of the TLWA tape *Bolo! Bolo!* at the Euclid Theatre as part of the queer South Asian cultural festival Desh Pradesh (1988-2001).

vignettes where safer sex and condom use is played out before our eyes. The content of the tape, however, more closely mirrors Fung's *Fighting Chance* where racialized gay men are foregrounded, and not heterosexual couples and women as they are in *The Colour of Immunity*.

The video features discussion among members of the recently formed Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP), a project that came out of KHUSH: South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association. Discussions focus on the challenges of immigration, racism, xenophobia, and inherited cultural taboos about sex, sexuality, and the family. Renowned Bengali-Canadian intellectual Himani Bannerji adds an authorial voice to the debates, with clips from a one-on-one interview between her and Ian Rashid intercut between group discussions among ASAP members. Bannerji is complemented by one-on-one interview clips of both her daughter Kaushalya who at the time was the Summer Coordinator at ASAP and prolific queer Indian-Canadian photographer Sunil Gupta. Ian Rashid, co-author of the video, also appears on screen, most notably as one of the two men portrayed in intimate vignettes as well as alongside Anthony Mohamed in the now infamous "men French kissing" scene that closes out the tape. Anthony Mohamed, who would become the first full-time coordinator at ASAP in 1990, also appears in an intimate cruising scene with an older white man played by AAN!'s Tim McCaskell. [68] This scene was noted as particularly important to include on the tape because, as Saxena noted, young South Asian men were often cruised by older more experienced white men and were not always knowledgeable or empowered enough to ask for safer sex. [69]



Jean Carlomusto seen in an editing suite

The shift in meaning between the first broadcast of the TLWA tapes, including the people and events they documented from 1989-1990, and the digital video files that are now available for research at Vtape after being salvaged from recovered submasters, is stark. The afterlife of the TLWA tapes is a testament to the power of collaboration, community, solidarity, and collective struggle in the face of HIV/AIDS's destruction and the Canadian Government's callousness, but these tapes also remain haunted by staggering loss. Jean Carlomusto and Gregg Bordowitz discuss what looking at video tapes of activist demonstrations years after they were shot feels like in Bordowitz's short *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993). In an editing suite Carlomusto and Bordowitz discuss the changing meaning of activist video tapes as time passes and more and more of their friends and comrades depicted in the videos they created have died.

The TLWA tapes are filled with members of Toronto's vibrant queer, feminist, and anti-racist activist scene and cultural milieu. Here we get a dynamic sense of the collective character of HIV/AIDS activism in Toronto, but watching the video from today's vantage point can also be particularly painful for many who were

discussing the changing meaning of AIDS activist tapes over time in Gregg Bordowitz's 1993 tape *Fast Trip, Long Drop*.



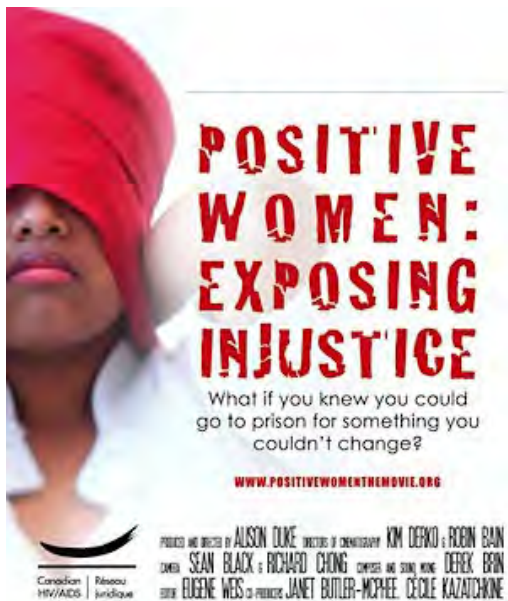
A photo of Lloyd Wong from his estate managed by Terry Guerriero who worked with Wong at the Euclid Cinema where many *TLWA* tapes premiered. He died from AIDS-related illness having never completed his tape *An Other Country* for *TLWA*.

closely connected with people from this milieu who are no longer with us. Contributors like Gregory Wight, Michael Smith, and Lloyd Wong, who never completed his tape entitled *An Other Country* for *TLWA* but worked as a crew member for a few tapes in the series, all died after a series of debilitating bouts of AIDS-related illnesses shortly after *TLWA* was broadcast. Series coordinator Michael Balser and *TLWA* contributor Gabriella Micallef would survive the 1990s only to pass away in the 2000s from AIDS-related illness and cancer respectively. Undoubtedly scores more have died who appear on these tapes, but remain either unnamed or untraceable. These absences haunt meters upon meters of recovered magnetic tape and time continues to alter the meaning made of these moving images from the recent past. Yet these videos endure as a testament to the resilience and creativity of queer, racialized, and/or HIV-positive people in the face of structured abandonment by the very governments that are supposedly there to defend and care for their citizens. Much like the way photographs functioned during the Holocaust as a technology of cultural memory, the videotapes of activist cultural interventions like *TLWA* serve as a vivid rejoinder against forgetting how the battles against HIV/AIDS were fought.[70] Not just to not forget, but to remember that our queerest gift, creativity, can be wielded to fierce and fabulous ends as the epidemic continues to expand even today.

Coda: *Toronto Living With AIDS 2.0*

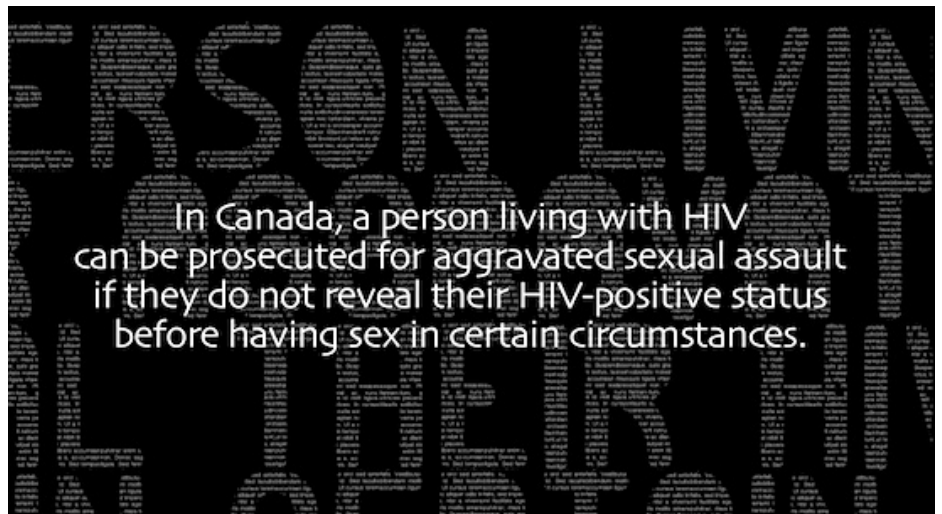
With the epidemic well into its fourth decade with no cure in sight, ongoing and emerging HIV/AIDS-related issues in Canada continue to command our attention. The criminalization of non-disclosure, the marketing and use of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention, the undetectable = untransmittable consensus statement, international trade agreements and intellectual property patents that make life-saving medications unaffordable globally, continued controversies over comprehensive sex education for young people, the exclusion of HIV-positive immigrants from Canada, the continued criminalization of sex work, the opioid epidemic, HIV/AIDS and hepatitis in prisons, the mental health and wellbeing of long-term survivors, and the disproportionate burden of seroconversion amongst racialized and Indigenous communities all continue to necessitate a scholarly and activist response.

Canadian documentarian Alison Duke's recent collaborative work with the HIV/AIDS Legal Network leads as one of very few examples. By pairing an artist with a community organization much as *TLWA* had done previously, she produced two documentaries: *Consent: HIV Non-Disclosure and Sexual Assault Law* (2015) and *Positive Women: Exposing Injustice* (2012). While Duke's two documentaries on women, HIV, and HIV non-disclosure make excellent teaching tools, I long for what Duke's work might look like if she was freed from the conventions of documentary filmmaking and the immediate goals of a nonprofit organization. What might Duke's contribution to a series like a *TLWA* reboot look like that instead utilizes the conventions of a heavily scripted narrative melodrama like *anOther Love Story* or a talk show like the *Great AZT Debate*? And how might a *TLWA* reboot be distributed differently today with the ongoing miniaturization of video and the ubiquitous expansion of private for-profit online video platforms that regularly censor queer content?[71]



Poster for Alison Duke's first video documentary on HIV non-disclosure in Canada entitled *Positive Women: Exposing Injustice* was made in

collaboration with the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network.



An intertitle appear onscreen in Duke's 2015 follow up video documentary entitled *Consent* explains how HIV non-disclosure can lead to charges of sexual assault in Canada.

Unfortunately, if we are to wait for government health agencies that today myopically fund interventions targeted at “priority populations” with quantitative, measurable, behaviour change outcomes, or arts agencies that continue to shy away from funding artist run centres to commission new work, we will never see *TLWA 2.0*. It may have been a fluke that Michael Balser secured funding for *TLWA* at a time when the AIDS bureaucracy in Canada was still professionalizing and opportunities for new approaches to dealing with the crisis could still be heard. Now, thirty years after *TLWA*'s first season, it has never been more urgent to relaunch such a series and tell new stories about living with HIV/AIDS in the 21st century—and for government health and arts agencies to pony up.

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Notes

Acknowledgements: This research was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council and the Archive/Counter-Archive project. This research greatly benefited from conversation and feedback from my colleagues over the last four years: Thomas Waugh, John Greyson, Janine Marchessault, Alexis Shotwell, Gary Kinsman, Andrew Sorfleet, George Stamos, Gary Lee Pelletier, Axelle Demus, Kyler Chittick, Kim Tomczak and Wanda vanderStoop at Vtape, David Plant and Emily Fitzpatrick at Trinity Square Video, my "AIDS Film & Video" students at Concordia University, and all the surviving contributors to TLWA that took the time to speak with me.

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The Colour of Immunity, Glace Lawrence, 1990, 30:00 minutes, Canada, color, English

Consent: HIV Non-Disclosure and Sexual Assault Law, Alison Duke,2015, 28:00 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Crowd Bites Wolf, Guerillavision Collective, 2001, 23:00 minutes, United Kingdom, color, English

Dallas Buyers Club, Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013, 117:00 minutes, United States, color, English

The Executor, James MacSwain and James Shedden, 1996, 9:50 minutes, Canada, color, English

Fast Trip, Long Drop, Gregg Bordowitz,1993, 54:04 minutes, United States, color, English.

Fighting Chance, Richard Fung, 1990, 30:00 minutes, Canada, color, English

The Great AZT Debate, John Greyson,1989, 30:00 minutes, Canada, color, English

House of Numbers: Anatomy of an Epidemic, Brent Leung,2009, 90:00 minutes, Canada, color, English.

How to Survive a Plague, David France, 2012, 109:00 minutes, United States, color, English

Keewaywin: AIDS in the First Nations, Doug Broman and the AIDS Committee of Thunderbay, 1990, 30:00 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Les Autres/Women and AIDS, Anne Golden, 1991, 31:00 minutes, Canada, color, French.

Lest We Forget: Syphilis in the AIDS Era, Colman Jones, 1995, 58:30 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Little Sister's vs. Big Brother, Aerlyn Weissman, 2002, 71:00 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Living with AIDS, Gay Men's Health Crisis, 1985-1990s, television series, United States, color, English.

The Medicine Show, Gregory Wight and James MacSwain, 1990, 30:00 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Médecins de Coeur, Tahani Rached, 1993, 112:00 minutes, Canada, color, French.

Nibo' Apinewin, Ted Myerscough, 1990, 30:00 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Nipoo Aspiniwin, Winnipeg Gay Media Collective and Nichiwakan Native Gay Society, 1991, 24:41 minutes, Canada, color, Swamp Cree.

Orientations, Richard Fung, 1985, 56:00 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Our Bodies Our Business, George Stamos, 2016, 24:30 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Person Livid With AIDS: A Day in the Life of a Gay Man Living with AIDS, Michael Smith, 1990, 99:46 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Philadelphia, Jonathan Demme, 1993, 126:00 minutes, United States, color, English.

Positive Women: Exposing Injustice, Alison Duke, 2012, 45:00 minutes, Canada, color, English and French.

The Real World: San Francisco, Mary-Ellis Bunion and Jonathan Murray, 1994, television series, United States, color, English.

Sea in the Blood, Richard Fung, 2000, 26:00 minutes, Canada, color, English

Silverlake Life: The View from Here, Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin, 1993, 99:00 minutes, United States, color, English.

Steam Clean, Richard Fung, 1990, 3:30 minutes, Canada, color, English

Survivors, Alfons Adetuyi, 1992, 48:00 minutes, Canada, color, English

Toronto Living With AIDS, Michael Balser, 1990-91, television series, Canada, color, English.

Video Against AIDS Vol 1-3, John Greyson and Bill Horrigan, 1989, 342:00 minutes, Canada and United States, color, English.

Voices of Positive Women, Michael Balser and Darien Taylor, 1992, 28:00 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Working Girls, Lizzie Borden, 1986, 90:00 minutes, United States, color, English.

The World Is Sick (sic), John Greyson, 1989, 30:00 minutes, Canada, color, English.

Zero Patience, John Greyson, 1993, 95:00 minutes, Canada, color, English.

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Hannibal's poster for Season One hints at the series' differences with the cinematic adaptations; when compared with the film posters, the menacing face of Lecter has been replaced with a rather refined image of Mads Mikkelsen as Lecter, in a tailored suit.



A murder tableau in "Futamono" (2.06); *Hannibal's* visuals are both stylized and surreal.

Adaptation as queer fan practice in Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*

by [Yaghma Kaby](#)

Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015) brings together varied and potentially conflicting concepts, making it a good case to investigate a moment of intertwined queerness, adaptation, and fan practice on television. The series is characterized by stylized and surrealistic visuals, conceived as "an art film from the 80's" according to Fuller and conforming to quality television standards, yet it aired on network television. It is an adaptation but one that explicitly distances itself from faithfulness to its source texts—Thomas Harris' novels and existing cinematic adaptations—while also positioning itself as a prequel. It is also a work by a TV auteur who is a self-proclaimed queer fan of the Lecter universe or a "Fannibal" and considers this work as his "fan fiction" (Fuller). [[open works cited in new window](#)]

This series was created in a new age for adaptations on television, an age marked by a redefined relation between creators and the literary texts they are adapting. Currently, showrunners are able to prioritize their creative impulse, especially to update a text, over linear faithfulness to a source text (Abbott 553; Barnett). In *Hannibal*, these creative impulses are further accentuated by Fuller's self-proclaimed fan status and queerness. *Hannibal* is the first television adaptation of Harris' novels and a prequel to *Red Dragon* (1981), the first novel in the Hannibal Lecter universe. Starting in the guise of an episodic police procedural drama, Bryan Fuller's series tells the story of the friendship, turned into obsessive relationship then turned into romantic love, between Lecter (Mads Mikkelsen) and the FBI profiler, Will Graham (Hugh Dancy), before and after Lecter is captured.

Here I will examine ways in which Fuller's *Hannibal* is a queer adaptation and an instance of a queer fan practice—one in which an author revises and brings attention to absences in a source text. Existing critical studies (such as those by Mat Daniel, and Lori Morimoto) have, directly or indirectly, outlined the differences that can be seen between the series, Thomas Harris' novels, and cinematic adaptations. Building on existing literature, I argue that *Hannibal's* queerness is made visible not only through its plot and visual representation of queer characters but also through a queer process of adaptation that works in conjunction with transformative fan practices.

For the purpose of this work, I understand fan practices to signal active engagement with a media text, for instance, through writing fan fiction or being an active member of a fandom. Moreover, my definition of the term "queer," in addition to signaling identity, follows Halperin's statement, "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (62). Based on this, if queer as an adjective or noun denotes identity and queering something denotes action and doing, then queer can be considered a verb. In conjunction with fan practices,



Bryan Fuller and actor, Hugh Dancy, wearing the Fannibals' signature flower crowns at San Diego Comic-Con (2015).



Hannibal stopping Will from impulsively shooting a murderer (2.08), while whispering “I could never entirely predict you”—one of the many scenes in which the series presents its homoerotic subtext.

then, queer can highlight practices by a queer fan or practices of a queer nature.

To complement the definitions above, in bringing together queerness and television under the term “queer television,” it becomes essential to look beyond representations of LGBTQ characters. In other words, queerness can also be made visible in the “medium” itself (Parsemain 13). In this sense, “[t]elevisual texts and practices that resist norms in terms of format, viewing experiences or modes of consumption” become queer (Parsemain 13). The TV landscape in the United States is more than ever receptive to queer stories and representations—more so on streaming and cable than on network television, as demonstrated by shows such as *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019) or *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-). That being said, queerness on television is still limited and up to the discretion of “network bosses, advertising regulators, standards bodies, and audiences” (Davis and Needham 3). In other words, there's a long road ahead before television fully normalizes queer.

Fuller's series complicates and deepens our understanding of relations between queer fan, TV auteur, and adapted text as these occur on contemporary U.S. television. In such a context, the present essay engages with how queerness is made visible in *Hannibal*, both in terms of queer representation in the series and in the show's conception and distribution as a network series. In the first part of the essay, I consider more generally ways in which authorship and fan identity intersect. Then I outline transformative fan practices and their relation to revealing queerness, specifically in *Hannibal*, so that I can highlight the corresponding transformations in this particular adaptation. With that, I examine the series' situatedness in relation to queer television. Fuller's own distinction between his works as “systematically gay,” “aesthetically gay,” and “narratively gay” (“Outfest”) is aligned with what scholars such as Parsemain have outlined in terms of queer television. For instance, Fuller's *Pushing Daisies*, while not including any explicitly LGBT characters, maintains a queer aesthetic in its cinematography. Fuller's most recent televisual work (also an adaptation), the first season of Starz! *American Gods*, however, took his distinction a step further and features explicitly gay characters. *Hannibal* both portrays queer characters and features a queer narrative, while also being undeniably “aesthetically gay” to use Fuller's own terminology, making its queerness systematic.



Pushing Daisies (ABC, 2007-2009), Fuller's “aesthetically gay” work.



Salim (Omid Abtahi) and the Jinn (Mousa Kraish) on the first season of *American Gods*.

Author, fan, or something in between? complexities of the fan/auteur figure

Given a revived interest in adapted works on television in recent years (Wells-

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Fuller drinking from a mug bearing the phrase “My ship is canon” and an image of Will and Hannibal from the series (@BryanFuller, Dec 11, 2018).

Lassagne), it would be fruitful to investigate how adaptation interacts with queerness and authorship. While a queer adaptation highlights an adapted work “modified by queerness,” queer/adaptation takes that a step further to signify works that are “not just adaptations that are about LGBTQ identity or composed or adapted by queer authors but adaptation understood as in some way already queer” (Demory, “Queer/Adaptation” 1). For Demory, the relation between adaptation and queerness is seen as direct and reciprocal: “[t]o queer [...] may be to adapt; to adapt is to queer” (1). In other words, in a work like *Hannibal*, queerness is not limited to the ensuing adapted text and representation of LGBTQ themes and characters. Rather, the process of adapting the text, its position with regards to its informing text(s), and its reception can all also align with queerness. While the first part of this framework (i.e. representation of LGBTQ themes and characters) has been explored in prior studies (Daniel), and my discussion also touches on them, the link between adaptation and certain forms of fan practice—notably, those that actively produce fan works, though not necessarily amateur—needs to be investigated further.

Although adapted media texts have often established legitimacy by being rooted in long-established literary tradition (usually via literary text to screen incarnation), adaptation and television have seemed less authentic than their literary and cinematic counterparts (Wells-Lassagne 3). Adaptation is often concerned with fidelity—conformity to a source text and progressing on a predetermined trajectory—but at times, adaptations attempt to foreground a source text’s ambiguities and instabilities, that is to say to “blur, erase, or trouble the boundaries” (Demory, “Queer Adaptation” 147), potentially destabilizing the text. While, this act of making strange or queering may not always be done by a queer author, based on Parsemain’s definition of queer television, an adapted text may possess covert or overt queer sensibilities.

Parallel to adaptation’s concern with fidelity is the complexity resulting from the fan/auteur relation. As noted, adaptations, especially those on television, have often been deemed inauthentic; media fans have not fared better in the eyes of

mainstream media where negative perceptions about fans and fandoms persist (Bennet and Booth 1). In this context, the coming-together of the two figures, fan and author, results in a degree of destabilization. Authors

“must have their own personal reasons for deciding first to do an adaptation and then choosing which adapted work and what medium to do it in. They not only interpret that work but in doing so they also take a position on it” (Hutcheon 92).

Similarly, fans, in their artwork and fictions, not only choose what text and what aspect of it to focus on but also offer their interpretation of the source text.

In the case of *Hannibal*, fidelity and authorial intent are shaped by Fuller’s own sexual identity as an openly homosexual man and his attempt not only to represent queerness but to also remake Harris’ novels informed by queerness—that is, to use Demory’s terminology, to offer a queer adaptation as well as a queer/adaptation. In Fuller’s own words, redoing what previous adaptations had done would have been pointless (“Hannibal at PaleyFest”). Notwithstanding, as a fan of the Lecter stories, he has defined his goal to “stay true to Thomas Harris, or the Thomas Harris-ian quality of the Hannibal Lecter tale” (ibid.). Bearing in mind the fannish turn of this transformation, as will be explained in the essay, Fuller’s statements argue that if fans’ work bears an initial resemblance to the source text (or canon) that they are writing back to, they are nevertheless stretching the fictional universe with an innovative turn.

As noted, Fuller has referred to himself as a “Fannibal”—a coined portmanteau term for a fan of the Hannibal Lecter universe—and calls the series his “fan fiction” (Hibberd). Yet, his fan status coincides with his status as a “storyteller-in-chief” or a “TV auteur.” The very term *auteur* has connotations of being avant-garde and anti-establishment (Later 534), which proves fertile when regarded in light of both Fuller’s and his work’s queerness. Parallel to this is how TV auteurs are themselves defined by their “work on shows adapting literary works” (Later 535). What Later calls an “appropriation of literary fiction formalism” (Later 535) itself is in turn a marker of quality or prestige television, which *Hannibal* embodies. As such, Fuller occupies an interesting position as both fan and auteur.

Hannibal as queer fan practice

To facilitate my inspection of *Hannibal* as a (queer) fan’s work, I turn now to examine shared practices between adaptation and fan work—in particular, transformation and repetition. Rachel Carroll notes,

“all adaptations express or address a desire to return to an ‘original’ textual encounter; as such, adaptations are perhaps symptomatic of a cultural compulsion to repeat” (1).

On the other hand, adaptation is also “repetition, but repetition without replication” (Hutcheon 7). This is an important distinction to bear in mind. It hints at a desire to distinguish the adapted text as independent. In the process, one might choose to rectify the original text’s shortcomings and absences while repeating pre-selected elements of the source. Such an approach accounts for multiple adaptations of the same source text, which also suggests that the informing text is unfinished and malleable—in other words, queerable.

Repetition in *Hannibal* is revealed in interesting ways: the show revisits parts of



Will Graham shooting Garret Jacob Hobbs

(1.01), only briefly mentioned in *Red Dragon*, but a propelling force for the story of *Hannibal*'s first season.



A scene in *Hannibal* (2001), with Anthony Hopkins as Lecter and Julianne Moore as Clarice Starling.

each of Harris' novels, but reformulates them into its own storyline. For example, Harris in *Red Dragon* takes just a few lines to describe Will Graham's shooting the serial killer Garret Jacob Hobbs. In the pilot of the TV series, that becomes an act whose consequences reverberate all through season one, and into Graham's ultimate "becoming" or embracing his true nature. Alternatively, dialogues from the novels are repurposed and at times given to other characters. Some repetitions in the series are also non-visual and non-textual: *Hannibal* uses iconic music from the films *Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal*—Bach's "Goldberg variations: Aria" and Patrick Cassidy's "Vide Cor Meum," respectively—to accentuate its ties to the Lecter universe. Repetitions of this kind are akin to moments when fan works make references to what exists in the original text's narrative universe; they do so in a way that is coherent within the body of the work and adds a certain level of pleasure for the reader (or viewer) who is familiar with both the informing text(s) and the fictional universe.

Repetition and going back to a source text, constant re-imaginings, and re-makings of a text—at times with the intention of opening them up to queerness—are not exclusive to adaptation; they are distinct characteristics of fan works and practices. Fan practices, including fan fiction writing and reading, are a means of establishing and sustaining a fan community and identity around media texts. Often, fans work to actively engage with texts they are emotionally invested in (McCormick 373). This engagement can take two major forms: affirmational and transformative. The former refers to practices that are in line with the trajectory of the source text, its universe, and the way its authors have imagined it. On the other hand, transformative practices seek a degree of distancing from the source text, molding the fan work into something new, aligned with the fan's identity. Most fan fiction falls under this latter category (Dill-Shackleford 35); therefore, it becomes essential to understand the creative impulse at the heart of transformative practices.



In "Mizumono" (2.13), the scene is shot similar to the movie *Hannibal*, where Will responds to Hannibal's "you'd deny me my life" with the same words as Clarice: "not your life, no."



Hannibal, carrying Clarice in his arms as he rescues her from the Verger Estate (in the 2001 cinematic adaptation, *Hannibal*).

In *Hannibal*, adapting the source texts into a new medium works in tandem with the transformative qualities that fannish practices, particularly fan fiction, possess. These transformative qualities are realized in terms of the circular, palimpsestuous nature of the series as a fan fiction adapted from Harris' novels and the Lecter movies (Morimoto). Focusing on the dynamics of fandom and fannish practices—their community-orientedness and their shared desire to appreciate a favorite text—Morimoto establishes *Hannibal*'s ties with fan fiction writing. In this sense, *Hannibal* can function as Fuller's fan fiction since as an adaptation, it displays writerly (or transformative) impulses, as opposed to read-only ones (Morimoto 271-272). Through extending the framework that Morimoto proposes, I argue that Fuller's inclusion of fannish discourse and engaging with fan practices within his transformative work of adaptation can be considered queer given the ways in which fannish practices and authorship (in the context of television) are brought together in the series. In this way, my argument does not solely address the outcome of a fan/auteur's creative work or question if the final

script is a fan fiction. Rather, I am concerned with a nonlinear mode of conceiving queerness in the process of adaptation, which opens up diverse approaches to investigating the work.



Similarly, after Hannibal rescues Will from the claws of Mason Verger, Margot's abusive brother, where they were both held hostage, he bridal-carries Will back to the safety of his home in Wolftrap, VA ("Digestivo," 3.07).

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The green bathroom in “Sorbet” (1.07, top photo) recalls *The Shining* (bottom photo).



Beverly Katz’s murder tableau (2.05, top photo) bears striking resemblance to a scene in Tarsem Singh’s *The Cell* (bottom).

Fuller’s dual position as fan and auteur complicates our understanding of the transformation that *Hannibal* embodies. While considering the series his fan fiction, Fuller also recognizes that he has been given an opportunity to produce his re-imagining of the source text professionally (“Hannibal at PaleyFest”). [\[open works cited in new window\]](#) A current model within the creative industries “encourages fans to strive to become part of the industry” (Busse 82). By “becoming part of the industry,” Fuller meets the specifications of the “promoted fanboy” figure, and as such, he may no longer align with a definition of an authentic fan (Later 536). As a result, according to Later, *Hannibal* does not fully embody fan fiction as a genre. In other words, even though there are aspects within the series that read as fan fiction—for instance, connections with fan fiction subgenres such as slash or alternative universes (AUs)—the differences in form and cultural positioning between the commercial series and fan fiction make the comparison untenable (Later 538).

Besides fan fiction, *Hannibal* has been likened to a fan video (or fanvid) due to its construction as a

“DJ mash-up style that not only reinvented the universe of the novels but also fit neatly with the ‘Harrisian’ theme of transformation” (McLean 8).

A fanvid is a short video in which fans use existing audiovisual material to tell their story. In *Hannibal*, a similar creative impulse brings together visual (and non-visual) elements from the Lecter movies and beyond. As already mentioned, the series’ use of pieces such as “Vide Cor Meum” and the Aria of “Goldberg Variations” functions in this vein. Similarly, there are intertextual visual references; for example, shots in “Aperitif” and “Sorbet,” (1.01 and 1.07, respectively) recall Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*. Another significant visual element that is repurposed in the series is the Lecter mask; here, it is first put on Will Graham in “Muko-zuke” (2.05), while he is mistakenly imprisoned on the charge of being a serial killer. These examples are in line with the transformation that marks fanvids in that the series repurposes primarily visual elements, thereby transforming its own visual narrative. Consequently, the series destabilizes the viewers’ expectations, especially those of viewers who are familiar with the Lecter universe.

While I see merit in the counterargument that the series should not be considered a fan fiction or a fan video, I also believe that investigating the process of transformative fan practices in this particular case will deepen our understanding of the influence of fandom and offer a more fluid framework with which to engage the television text. Even though in this case, studios and multiple producers initiate the process of transformation across media platforms, there are elements within said process—and the ensuing televisual text—that would benefit from being investigated queerly. In other words, the series is best understood when regarded as an instantiation of transformative practices in the broader sense, since these are a significant element of adaptation as queering as well as a key defining factor of fan works.

What Fuller is attempting as a fan expands the limits of Henry Jenkins’ conception of fan works as “textual poaching.” For Jenkins, fan works are a result of fans “assert[ing] their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the

raw materials for their own cultural productions” (24). In this sense, fans channel and appropriate source texts. Thus, while *Hannibal* potentially complicates outright comparisons to fan fiction due to Fuller’s position as a TV auteur, the text itself goes beyond previous envisionings of the Hannibal narrative, in textual and visual forms. In other words, even though novelist Thomas Harris’ words get repurposed, and at times, the TV series draws visual parallels with the cinematic adaptations, these are utilized to foreground the now original story that Fuller, the fan/auteur, is attempting to tell. Moreover, his original story is informed by his own queerness.

Rather than seeing clear-cut distinctions between affirmative and transformative works, I view *Hannibal* as possessing qualities from both such practices. Granted, a “promoted fanboy” model counters my viewpoint because “it requires certain forms of engagement with the media, mostly those we’d call affirmational rather than transformational fans” (Busse 82). In the case of *Hannibal*, we can witness affirmational practices in the series’ status as an adaptation (of the prequel/reboot type) and would acknowledge the ties to its source texts—Harris’ novels and multiple films based on them. Such connections mark these texts as being part of the same narrative universe or textual canon. At the same time, Fuller’s work is largely transformative. Namely, it brings attention to the absences within the source texts, especially as they pertain to the treatment and representation of LGBTQ characters and stories. It also deviates from the expected medium for the work—i.e. film rather than television is the expected place for most literary adaptation. Briefly put, *Hannibal* widens the textual canon of the Lecter universe, introducing new characters and narratives stemming from but not bound by the old ones. It transforms and remakes the text to meet the demands of its cultural context.

The role of queerness in this fannish act of transformation aligns with “utopian possibilities” put forward in fan work (Lothian 240). According to Lothian, in the face of oppression from the society, LGBTQ people may turn to creating an “imaginary” future. That future, while “inaccessible,

[...] can be invoked without necessitating an earnest, literal belief that utopian possibilities could truly be enacted” (240).

In the context of fan works, this “earnest literalism [is turned] into a variety of art forms” (240). *Hannibal* fits such a framework: Bryan Fuller has created a utopian world rooted in the Thomas Harris novels (and the Lecter movies). It’s similar to an Alternate Universe in fan fiction terminology—that is, free from the queerphobia and stereotypical representations of the source text(s). As the narrative trajectory and characters of the series demonstrate, queerness is possible and it is positively represented in this world. In the series, the romantic love that develops between Lecter and Graham and the lesbian couple of Margot Verger and Alana Bloom manifest queer utopian possibilities, accentuating the series’ proximity to transformative practices. Moreover, the ending of Season Three finale—Will pulling Hannibal off a cliff in an embrace after their shared killing of the Red Dragon and a post-credits scene with table set for three—provides ample space for fans to create their own version of events, where a queer future for the characters is envisioned.

While fans have been generally Othered and fan fiction writing typically associated with female fans, oftentimes negatively (Jenkins 15), Fuller’s stated alignment with fans and fan fiction as a practice makes space for female and queer fans and their writing in mainstream culture. It should also be noted that



After they kill Francis Dolarhyde, aka the Red Dragon, together, Will embraces Hannibal before pushing them both off a cliff (3.13). Many fans have published artwork and fan fiction on their interpretation of the story after this point.



Three seats at a table, hinting that Will and Hannibal have survived the fall, while Bedelia Du Maurier waits (3.13).

Fuller's own consumption of fan art, most of which depict male/male pairings between Lecter and Graham (also known as "hannigram"), acknowledges and validates the contribution of fans, most of whom tend to be women. Fuller's affective engagement with Fannibals on Twitter further places him within fandom's community of practices. Moreover, in contrast with TV showrunners who "regulate meaning" when fans engage with their work (Jenkins 23), Fuller embraces alternative interpretations put forward by the Fannibals. Through his fan-auteur status and his act of fannish adaptation, Fuller brings the source text closer to its fans. He simultaneously opens the script up to queer interpretations, and he creates proximity with fan practices in the act of claiming his own Fannibal status.

Hannibal as queer (and fannish) adaptation

One critic referred to *Hannibal* as "quite an interesting (and series-TV-friendly) departure from films like *Silence of the Lambs*," signaling its uniqueness as a screen adaptation (Hibberd). Others labeled the series as "prequel" (Yeoman) or "reboot" (Raftery), each term hinting at a different conception of adaptation. While a prequel pertains to the story happening before the one being adapted, a reboot gives a fresh incarnation to an existing film or television series. They are both forms of adaptation, in that the adapted text engages the source text, and both signal the malleability of the source text. *Hannibal* is simultaneously a prequel and a reboot, meaning that the series tells the story happening before Lecter's capture and imprisonment as depicted in Harris' *Red Dragon* and the movie *Manhunter*. However, it also refreshes the story of the cinematic adaptations but does so in the medium of television.

In this context, queerness is variously revealed in *Hannibal*. While Daniel and Morimoto have compared Fuller's adaptation with the novels, I wish to read characters and narrative in light of queer fan transformation. Daniel's work does discuss queerness in *Hannibal* and draws on Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* to outline the TV series' representations of sexuality in comparison to Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs*. Daniel, however, does not examine *Hannibal*'s queer representation in a framework that brings together fan practices and TV adaptations.

Anyone moderately familiar with the Lecter universe would be able to identify the most visible transformations in terms of characters in Freddie Lounds, Alana Bloom, and Margot Verger. The first two characters are genderswapped from the novels—a common trope in transformative fan works—and *Hannibal*'s Margot Verger counters Harris' stereotypical portrayal of a lesbian woman. Lounds, the tabloid journalist who also makes an appearance in the book and film *Red Dragon*, is a woman running a tabloid blog in Fuller's series (Lara Jean Chorostecki). She is one of the characters who makes Graham and Lecter's queer relationship explicit as she refers to them as "murder husbands" in the ninth episode of season three, "And the Woman Clothed with the Sun." Because of that, *Hannibal*'s iteration of Lounds becomes a mouthpiece for series fans, who had up to that point expressed interest in a "canon" romantic relationship between the two lead characters. Fuller's intentionality with regards to the adaptation and his engagement with fandom sheds light on this reciprocal exchange. Here, using the term "murder husbands" hints at his awareness of fan existing discourses around the (subtextual) relationship between Lecter and Graham and his acknowledging



Top: Lara Jean Chorostecki as Freddie Lounds. The role was played by Philip Seymour Hoffman in *Red Dragon* (bottom).

them.



Katharine Isabelle as Margot Verger.



Caroline Dhavernas as Dr. Alana Bloom, replacing the novels' Dr. Alan Bloom.



Will Graham (Edward Norton) and Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) in *Red Dragon* (2002).



The other two notable character transformations in *Hannibal*, Dr. Alana Bloom and Margot Verger, follow a similar pattern. Margot Verger (Katharine Isabelle), one of the explicitly queer women in the series, is distanced from Harris' stereotypical lesbian as butch bodybuilder, and in the series she has a more prominent place in the story arc—unlike in the film adaptations where she is almost entirely omitted. *Hannibal's* Margot is an active agent in her own life; the series reprises her backstory as a survivor of abuse in a wealthy, misogynistic family. In addition, Fuller has remarked on the portrayal of Margot in Harris' novel and his intention to not repeat it:

"it was unclear to me in the novel whether she was either transgender or a lesbian as a *result* of those horrible abuses and that horrible childhood and [Beat.] that's not how transgenderism or homosexuality works. So I didn't want to contribute to that misconception of what it is to be transgender or a gay woman." (VanDerWerff)

Dr. Alana Bloom (Caroline Dhavernas) is genderswapped from a peripheral character in Harris' *Red Dragon*, Dr. Alan Bloom. *Hannibal's* Dr. Bloom is bisexual. While she may be a proxy for queer desires between Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter, she's more significant for the series' queer representation as Margot Verger's wife. These innovations, i.e. genderswapping and giving peripheral characters new narrative importance, typify fan works, solidifying the link between adaptation and transformative fan practices.

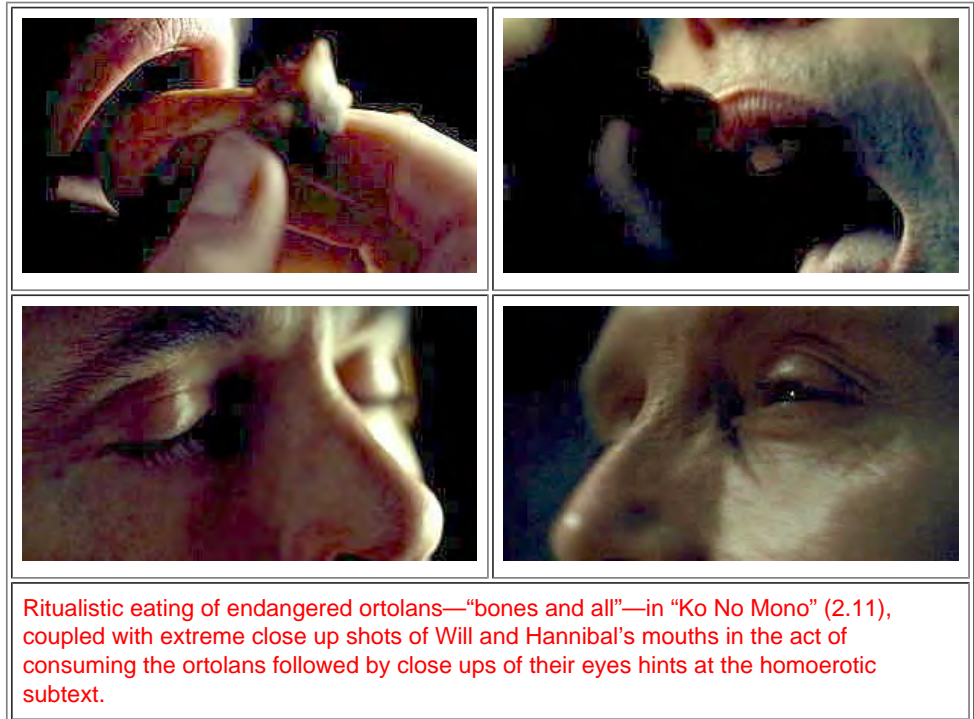
The relationship between Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter is not even present in the novels in the way the series depicts it. Similar to Alana and Margot's union, this too is Fuller's creation and the uniqueness of his adaptation. In the novel *Red Dragon* and its cinematic adaptation, in Will Graham's only meaningful interaction with Lecter, he gets stabbed by the latter while attempting to capture him. In the series, however, Graham and Lecter first meet in a patient-psychiatrist situation, which is complicated by Lecter's framing Graham for the Chesapeake Ripper murders—which Lecter himself committed. Even though Lecter stabs Graham in "Mizumono" (2.13), the circumstances that lead to this event are different from the novels and movies. And that scene's execution now gestures toward and intensifies a homoeroticism built into many previous episodes across two seasons.

Fuller had initially intended this relationship to be about homosocial male friendships; he claims he had not set out to "homosexualize" Hannibal Lecter ("Hannibal at PaleyFest"). However, as this relationship develops, a subtextual homoeroticism becomes explicit and textual. Since the series cancellation in



Contrary to the cinematic adaptation and Harris' novels, the series *Hannibal* takes a different trajectory in executing the scene where Lecter stabs Graham, framing it in the context of Hannibal and Will planning to run away together, and Will betraying Hannibal instead. The homoerotic current of this scene is heightened.

2015, Fuller has commented on the characters' sexual orientation, notably that of Lecter and Graham. While such statements signal an author's attempt to "gain proximity to fans" (Scott 44), they also function to legitimize fan interpretations since here the author is not engaged in "regulating meaning" produced by an interpretive community of fans (Jenkins 23). Fuller's statements also expand a framework of queer possibilities for the work. As an adapted work, the series offers a space to cultivate queer interpretations and lets viewers engage with it through a queer perspective.



Daniel has discussed the ways in which queerness is demonstrated in the plot of the series versus Harris' novels, focusing on the relationship between Alana Bloom and Margot Verger as the vessel for communicating queerness. According to Daniel,

"Fuller's adaptation creates more room for queerness while simultaneously disavowing the characterization of queerness within the source material" (75).

In addition to the series' portrayal of non-heteronormative families (71-72), in season two Alana and Hannibal's relationship, although heterosexual, is queered. That is, Alana and Hannibal's sex scenes in season two all get marked by mentioning Will Graham in some capacity. This bringing Will into these scenes culminates in a plot development in "Naka-Choko" (2.10), where parallel to Alana and Hannibal having sex, Will has a one-night stand with Margot Verger—as she seeks to get pregnant and produce a male heir to the Verger family as she plots to kill her abusive brother.

The editing in this section makes Lecter and Graham's implicit queer desires



Hannibal, Alana, and Will pictured in the same bed, as if in a threesome ("Naka-Choko", 2.10).

explicit. Even though we as viewers know that the two sexual relationships are occurring in different places (one could argue at different times too since little information to the contrary is provided to the viewer and the series' conception of time is somewhat warped), subliminally the two locations are connected. Hannibal, Will, and Alana are shot in the same bed, as if they are in a ménage à trois. This, according to Daniel, reveals the queerness in Hannibal and Will's relationship (77). I would add that a shot in that scene superimposes Hannibal and Will in their respective moments of orgasm; such a visual juxtaposition destabilizes our perception of time and place, and it inevitably opens up space for the two main characters' queer desires.



In "Naka-Choko" (2.10), Hannibal and Alana's sex scene is paralleled to that of Margot and Will. Then, the superimposed shot of Hannibal and Will opens up space for the queer desires of the two main characters: it is as if they are having sex with each other.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



"A valentine, written on a broken man," Will says as he touches the heart-shaped corps Hannibal left for him to find in "Primavera" (3.02).

Despite scenes similar to the above, in the first two seasons the queerness in *Hannibal* is subtextual and implicit, becoming more explicit and textual in the third season. Nevertheless, the

"array of gay images that are less coherently or cohesively constructed, strategized or premeditated... [open] up, rather than [shut] down, a variety of queer associations, identifications, desires, narrative and histories on, and through television" (Wlodarz 92). [[open works cited in new window](#)]

One such example occurs in "Dolce" (3.06), where "*Hannibal's* depiction of explicit queerness [between Margot and Alana] also deepens the implicit queerness of Will and Hannibal" (Daniel 77). In this episode, Margot and Alana's kaleidoscopic lesbian sex scene directly follows Will and Hannibal's reuniting in the Uffizi Gallery, after Hannibal's escape to Italy and Will sailing out to find him. The dialogue in this scene verges on a love declaration between Lecter and Graham; Margot and Alana's sex scene directly following strengthens such an interpretation. Beyond this array of gay images and dialogue, in the penultimate episode of season three ("The Number of the Beast Is 666," 3.12) Hannibal's romantic love for Will is spelled out in a conversation between Will and Lecter's psychiatrist, Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier:

"WILL: Is Hannibal in love with me?

DR. BEDELIA DU MAURIER: Could he daily feel a stab of hunger for you and find nourishment at the very sight of you? Yes."



Margot and Alana's kaleidoscopic sex scene, following Will and Hannibal's reunion in the Uffizi Gallery, is both aesthetically and narratively queer ("Dolce," 3.06).



Will and Hannibal reunite in the Uffizi Gallery ("Dolce," 3.06). Hannibal's line here, "If I saw you forever, Will, I would remember this time," gestures at the implicit romantic relationship between the two, making it explicit.



As the camera focuses on Dr. Du Maurier's and Will's face, the viewer is able to glean every reaction to the words heard.

To circle back to the discussion on adaptation and its relation to queerness, none of these characters and relationships existed like this in any of *Hannibal's* source texts. They are all part of Fuller's novelty in doing the adaptation and making



After asking Dr. du Maurier whether Hannibal is in love with him, a superimposed shot emphasizes the connection between Will and Hannibal (3.12).



Alana and Margot are able to get away in the season three finale (3.13), presenting an alternative to the kill-your-gays trope.

room for queerness. Further, the created space for queerness functions through demonstrating the unsustainability of its heterosexual relationships—Alana and Hannibal in season two, as well as Will and his wife, Molly, and Francis Dolarhyde and his partner, Reba McClane, in season three. This unsustainability fits in well with fan practices, especially as it concerns cult television series. That is, heterosexual romances fail so that “the audience [can] find queer pleasures in cult genres and texts” (Gwenllian-Jones 88). In this sense, fans interpret heterosexual relationships as “mundane,” (88) standing in the way of the narrative trajectory. Heterosexual love is not the primary focus in slash (m/m) or femslash (f/f) fictions (89) since in slash, fan creators can emphasize the queer possibilities of same-sex pairings.

Alternatively, when examining the show’s queer characters and their storylines, we can see that “it is so naturalized within the text that we are free of any questioning moments or drama centered on sexual orientation” (Nielsen and Finn 579). Even though on the surface, the script breaks up heterosexual relationships, queerness in *Hannibal* is not

“a rigid opposition to heterosexuality. Instead, it is the fluidity of the characters—their sexuality, their relationship, their shifting values—that makes them fundamentally queer” (Daniel 83).

As I have discussed, queerness is made possible through the supplementation that Fuller has brought to the stories and characters in the Lecter universe. These attempts, in terms of their transformative qualities, ultimately put *Hannibal* in closer proximity to fan practices.

Fuller is a queer fan—with access to the creative industries—who attempts to challenge the undesirable aspects of a loved and well-circulated text. His work aims at uncovering subtexts and aspects of the story that have remained untold, while staying faithful to the essence of Harris’ writing—his “purple, bloated prose” (“Hannibal: A Delicious Reunion”). Thus, Fuller’s adaptation shows an underlying resistance to the heteronormative tendencies of the source text(s) and their lack of queer representation (and often homophobia). Such a resistance also marks fan practices in general and their queer, transformative impulses in particular. *Hannibal* exemplifies a desire to re-vision and write back to a favorite text, a practice notably common for female and queer fans who do not always see themselves represented in those texts. This is not to suggest that queer fan practices are wish-fulfilment; rather, by a queer revision of a source text, many of its erasures and heteronormative assumptions are thrown into relief. Through not simply affirming its source texts, *Hannibal* “cannibalizes” them (Morimoto 265), and in turn transmutes them into something that is uniquely other, in terms of content, form and medium.

Hannibal and queer TV

Thus far, we inspected Fuller’s *Hannibal* for bringing together adaptation and fan practices in a queer manner to produce a queer text. However, *Hannibal*’s queerness is not limited to aesthetics, narrative, or author. *Hannibal*’s positioning as a television series is queer as well. Historically speaking, *Hannibal* aired in a period that could potentially be, in Parsemain’s words “The Golden Age of Queer



Flashbacks in *Hannibal*: Hannibal and Abel Gideon cannibalizing Gideon's leg (top) in "Futamono" (2.06). The scene reprised as a flashback in "Antipasto" (3.01) in black and white.



Will Graham with the specter of Garret Jacob Hobbs (2.13); an example of repeated images that signify the nonlinearity and self-awareness of the narrative trajectory.

Representation" (31). Thanks to streaming platforms such as Hulu and Netflix and their original content, the post-2010s era has allocated a greater emphasis and visibility to queer perspectives, stories and representations (31-32). Given that network and cable television directly face competition from streaming services, they need to include more diverse programming in order to sustain viewership—even though networks are rather conservative in defining what diversity should look like.

Thus, queerness can also be found in the medium as well as the narrative. *Hannibal* challenges quality (or prestige) television's placement in and associations with cable television as it aired on NBC (network) for three seasons, before it got cancelled in June 2015. Fuller has admitted to understanding he was crossing the boundaries of genre and platform, as exemplified by choosing "the cable model" and a limited number of episodes with a longer run time as opposed to the network model of several short episodes per season (Hibberd). Keeping the narrative tight and cohesive has been the reason for this bridging between cable and network formats:

"[D]oing a cable model on network television gives us the opportunity not to dally in our storytelling because we have a lot of real estate to cover" (Hibberd).

Consequently, *Hannibal* complicates the adaptation-quality television correlation not only for being a queer adaptation but also for airing on network television—i.e. an example of "non-traditional media" (Demory, "Queer Adaptation" 149)—and working within its standards and practices to tell its queer story.

Circling back to my discussion on adaptation will make the quality television distinction and *Hannibal's* association with it clearer. Attention paid to narrative complexity is a marker of quality or prestige television. Such complexity adds to adaptation's significance for television in general, and for this series in particular. Narrative complexity, as analyzed by Jason Mittell, refers to a specific form of storytelling on contemporary U.S. television that is distinct from episodic and conventional television series:

"the relationship [...] between multiple plotlines [is altered], creating interweaving stories that often collide and coincide" (Mittell 34).

Adaptation works particularly well by using a complex narrative structure. That helps a series establish legitimacy and as a next step, proximity to quality television. *Hannibal* ties these strands together, with its complex narrative and adapted status, but it simultaneously transforms them by airing on NBC.

Seriality in television, the "'sense of historicity and progress'—a linear, forward momentum that typifies the serial form," once disrupted also makes space for



"Primavera" (3.02) opens with the same scene that closed "Mizumono" (3.13), this time focusing on Will Graham reliving the trauma of the event.



After Will is shot in Dolce (3.06), Hannibal injects him with sedatives. In the dreamscape/hallucination that follows, Hannibal and Will are depicted as two swirling, amorphous shapes that end up becoming one, "conjoined" as Will had described earlier in the Uffizi Gallery.

queerness (Geller and Banker 37). *Hannibal's* status as a prequel, one that also heavily uses characters and dialogue from the texts presumably coming after it—in the Lecter universe timeline—aligns with this disruption since it disregards linear, progressive time. Further, the series' cancellation came as a literal discontinuation of its progression. On a smaller level, frequent repetitions and flashbacks also disrupt a movement towards an end; in that way, for example, images of Garret Jacob Hobbs, the serial killer Graham gunned down in "Aperitif" (1.01) are present throughout the first season. The first half of season three also offers a prime example of such disruption: flashbacks show Lecter's cannibalizing Abel Gideon in "Antipasto" (3.01), while the act itself belongs to the second season's timeline. Similarly, in "Primavera" (3.02), Will Graham revisits the traumatic, bloody carnage of "Mizumono" (2.13) that ended with Hannibal stabbing Graham and severely injuring Alana Bloom and Jack Crawford after Hannibal realizes he was betrayed by Graham. These disruptions in the serial form destabilize the viewers' engagement with the text, disorienting them, and in turn making the narrative strange or queer.

Conclusion

When taking in all these distinct aspects of the series, we can see how *Hannibal* resists previously established structures in U.S. television. In *Hannibal*, Fuller takes television's efforts to be considered a legitimate art form a step further. By aligning himself with fan practices, he legitimizes them too. In other words, the legitimization of television in this instance occurs through adapting a literary text and using that opportunity to "to insist on the artistic possibilities of the small screen" (Wells-Lassagne 128). I propose an added consideration—this particular adaptation is queer(ed) in its content and its production.

As a queer(ed) adaptation, *Hannibal* is revisionist. It "can write back to its informing original from a new and revised perspective" and "highlight often perplexing gaps, absences and silences within the original" (Sanders 126). Such gaps and erasures are revealed as Fuller genderswaps characters, portrays the lesbian couple Margot Verger and Alana Bloom, and creates a narrative space to explore the relationship between Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham. These revisions to Harris' source text occur parallel to positioning *Hannibal* as a prequel/reboot. Such a combination of Fuller's "critiquing or resisting a source text's conventional narrative structure or normative ideologies" and his "tampering with the temporal dimension of the source text" result in queering the show (Demory, "Queer/Adaptation" 5). Fuller's *Hannibal* is a TV series that occurs in the intersection of, and blurs the lines between, adaptation and fan practice. Despite the usual fan/auteur dichotomy, *Hannibal* combined with Fuller's fan-oriented discourse adds legitimacy to mainstreaming fans. In short, this is a queer adaptation that writes back to its source text. It is Fuller's attempt, as fan and queer auteur, to right the wrongs of Harris' novels and resist their erasures, offering an alternative and more inclusive reading.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Hannibal depicts the titular cannibal assisting the FBI in solving crimes – while, befitting the narrative needs of serialized television, he continually prevents his own capture.



As a procedural akin to the *Law & Order* franchise (1990-) airing alongside it on NBC, *Hannibal* presents a different serial killer almost every week – filtered through an exaggerated, campy sensibility through which it emphasizes the materiality and malleability of human bodies.



Much of the series' overall plot follows Lecter's increasingly close relationship to FBI consultant Will Graham – as his co-worker, his psychiatric patient, and as the object of an (all but explicitly stated) romantic infatuation.

Queer adaption and *becoming* in NBC's *Hannibal*

review by [Patrick Woodstock](#)

Kavita Mudan Finn and EJ Nielsen, eds. *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019, 321 pp., \$70 hardcover, \$35 paperback and e-book.

As Netflix was laying the groundwork for our current era of prestige streaming TV through their first forays into original programming in 2013, the newly-vulnerable world of network TV welcomed the return of Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Dormant since the largely forgettable film *Hannibal Rising* (Dir. Peter Webber, 2007), NBC revived the cannibal psychiatrist for *Hannibal* (2013-2015), as part of an ensemble cast in perhaps the most paradigmatic genre of network TV: the police procedural.

This new generic framework represents a departure from previous Lecter-related works (including four novels by Thomas Harris and their assorted film adaptations), whose self-contained narratives focus on serial killers whose threat is more or less subdued by the story's end. By way of contrast, *Hannibal's* Lecter (portrayed by Mads Mikkelsen) aids the troubled FBI consultant Will Graham (Hugh Dancy) in catching serial killers on a weekly basis – the show's open-ended structure enabling the cannibal to continually evade capture.

At least, this is how the series begins—and the story of its gradual transformation into something far less conventional (and much queerer) makes *Hannibal* an essential case study in the possibilities and inherent limitations of queer representation on network TV.

This story is at the heart of *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal*, a new scholarly collection about the show edited by Kavita Mudan Finn and EJ Nielsen. Given that *Hannibal* remains largely unexplored due to its relatively recent run, *Becoming* positions itself as a general critical overview of the show, assembling an interdisciplinary collection of perspectives from gender studies, criminology, history, and beyond – alongside short contributions from some of the show's creators. [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) *Becoming* positions itself as a critical overview of the show, assembling an interdisciplinary collection of perspectives from fields ranging from gender studies, criminology, history, and beyond—alongside short contributions from some of the show's creators. What prevents *Becoming* from being overly broad is its chapters' shared focus on *Hannibal* as a particularly complex work of *adaptation*. As a whole, the collection tracks how *Hannibal* transforms its often profoundly homophobic and transphobic source texts into a distinctly queer variation of the serial killer genre, often by focusing on the central relationship between Lecter and Graham.

One of the earliest essays in *Becoming* demonstrates the innovative possibility of



this focus on adaptation, arguing that *Hannibal* fundamentally queers the notion of serialization itself by bringing a *serial* killer narrative to the *serialized* form of network TV. In their chapter, “Hannibal Lecter’s Monstrous Return: The Horror of Seriality in Bryan Fuller’s *Hannibal*,” Jessica Balanzategui, Naja Later, and Tara Lomax examine how serialized storytelling tends to be disregarded as a “monstrous textual form” within television, literature, and cinema.[2] Instead of a single hermetic text, episodic network TV offers open-ended narratives marked by a “disruptive temporality, uncontainable textual scope, [...] and resistance to closure, [brought about] by textual devices such as adaptation, sequels/prequels, [and] remaking.”[3]

The authors propose that this distaste for an aimless seriality is also central to the emergence of the serial killer as a figure of public anxiety during the 1970s and 1980s:

“Key to the horrifying nature of the serial killer is that he is motivated not by a quest for development according to a prewritten script of social and personal progress, but instead by a compulsion to [continually] restage the same violent and socially reprehensible act.”[4]

On one level, Hannibal Lecter embodies this monstrous seriality as the centrepiece of a sprawling constellation of cultural products which continually revisit and reimagine the same plot points, characters, and iconography. However, this refusal to be restricted to a single medium or consistent fictional canon is only part of the uncontainability that is central to Lecter’s continued appeal. In each of his incarnations, he embodies an abject challenge to both physical space (in his ability to manipulate others from within his cell) and a variety of sociocultural hierarchies (as a psychologist nonetheless marked as ‘pathological,’ who regards human bodies as raw materials for consumption). The authors suggest that this diegetic uncontainability works alongside the inherent circularity and endlessness of network TV narrative to situate Lecter in queer opposition to linear temporality (or, borrowing Lee Edelman’s terminology, “reproductive futurism”), and to instead create a sense of boundless potential:

“The imminent future becomes a liminal space in which deviant, alternate, and radical narratives may be explored.”[5]

| | |
|--|---|
|  |  |
| <p>A central component to each of Lecter's manifestations across media is his capacity to influence events outside of his cell once incarcerated ...</p> | <p>...as well as his ability to escape from these physical confines.</p> |
| | |



Lecter further destabilizes this inside/outside binary through his existence as a cannibal, as *Hannibal* emphasizes by comparing the horrifying sight of internal organs ...



...with the unsettling pleasure derived from the dishes Lecter turns them into.



Hannibal's final episode references the mask worn by Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs* – even as most of the series' events are pulled from this novel/film's various sequels. Thus, *Hannibal* cannot easily be classified as a sequel, prequel, or remake in its complex approach to adaptation.



Following Harris' novel *Red Dragon*, *Hannibal's* third season depicts Graham within a heteronormative family that is disrupted by the threat of the serial killer.

This endless potentiality is evidenced by the thriving world of *Hannibal* fanfiction –especially given showrunner Bryan Fuller's description of the show as “his own fanfiction” of the Lecter texts, which positions *Hannibal* as merely one non-authoritative narrative option amongst many.[6] This notion of *Hannibal* itself as queer fanfiction is further explored by Lori Morimoto in her meticulously detailed contribution to *Becoming*, “*Hannibal*: Adaptation and Authorship in the Age of Fan Production.” Like seriality, the refusal of fanfiction and other fanworks to fit within a single canon leads to disqualification, often along gendered lines:

“[I]nsofar as ‘fanfiction’ is written overwhelmingly by women, the term *fanfiction* is [...] used pejoratively in writing by (often male) fan critics and media commentators as a way of foregrounding such texts’ feminized excesses and infidelities.” [7]

Morimoto goes on to describe how this sense of “infidelity” is a guiding principle of *Hannibal's* approach to adaptation: instead of a reverential page-to-screen transcription of Harris's novels, the show becomes a “multitextual palimpsest,” which recontextualizes, rearranges, and repurposes dialogue and incidents from its source texts to craft an original story of queer desire. [8]

Other contributions to *Becoming* echo this characterization of *Hannibal* as queer fanfiction as they consider the ways in which the show contends with the problematic aspects of its source texts. One such contribution, Ellie Lewerenz's “Adapt. Evolve. Become: Queering *Red Dragon* in Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*,” examines *Hannibal's* loose, “cannibalistic” approach in adapting Harris's first Lecter novel, *Red Dragon* (the source of many of the show's main characters, as well as the basis for much of the third season's plot).[9] Like the show, the novel *Red Dragon* presents protagonist Will Graham as troubled by his exceptional capacity for empathy—he is uniquely useful to the FBI for this ability to project himself into the mind of serial killer Francis Dolarhyde, but he fears that this affinity reveals an underlying ‘deviance’ in himself. Lewerenz suggests that, given Harris's homophobic characterization of Dolarhyde, Graham's internal struggle to disavow and contain his potential ‘deviance’ takes on a heteronormative resonance, and ultimately upholds the fictional detective's conventional role as a “threshold between the normative and the nonnormative.”[10]

However, Lewerenz examines how the addition of a queer attachment between Graham and Lecter in *Hannibal* reframes this entire narrative. In both versions, Dolarhyde obsesses over the exaggerated musculature of the biblical Red Dragon as painted by William Blake, repeatedly stating that he is drawn to murder to enact a “becoming,” or self-realization of this powerful persona. Given the ending of Harris' novel—Dolarhyde's death and Graham's return to his wife and son—this unrealized desire for self-transformation infers the pathology and impossibility of queer identity. *Hannibal*, however, instead ends with Graham and Lecter killing



The character of Francis Dolarhyde (a precursor to Jame Gumb/Bufalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs*) is defined by a desire to “become” the biblical Red Dragon, as painted by William Blake.



Like Blake's painting, Dolarhyde is representative of the same stifled desire for self-transformation and the impossibility of queer identity which define Harris' homophobic and transphobic source novels.

Dolarhyde together—suggesting the completion of Graham's own “becoming,” and replacing the supposed impossibility of queerness with a sense of utopic possibility, evidenced by the closing exchange of the series:

Lecter: “See? This is all I ever wanted for you. For both of us.”

Graham: “It's beautiful.” [11]

As such, Lewerenz offers a powerful demonstration of how fidelity and infidelity in adaptation can work together to salvage homophobic source texts:

“The faithful aspects of *Hannibal's* adaptation process work together with elements of queer deconstruction [...] so that even the most unmodified parts of the novel work towards a queering of the source.”[12]



The series ends with Lecter and Graham sharing an intimate moment and then tumbling off of a cliff – even as the camera zooms in to reveal and empty expanse of water below. Unlike *Red Dragon*, in which Graham returns to his family after Dolarhyde and Lecter are contained, the series offers an open horizon which recalls the infinite possibilities of José Esteban Muñoz' description of a queer utopia.

This account is especially pertinent given that Dolarhyde is a clear precursor to Jame Gumb/Bufalo Bill, the serial killer antagonist of the book/film *The Silence of the Lambs* who infamously personifies the endemic transphobia of Harris's novels. Because the creators of *Hannibal* held the rights to adapt every piece of Lecter-related media except for *Lambs*, the series does not directly portray Gumb/Bill—but the legacy of Harris's misrepresentation of trans identity looms large over the series. This issue is the focus of Evelyn Deshane's contribution to *Becoming*, “The Great Red Dragon: Francis Dolarhyde and Queer Readings of Skin,” which argues that *Hannibal* uses the character of Dolarhyde to recognize and atone for the misrepresentation of trans identity offered by Gumb/Bill.

Recall that, in Harris's original novel of *The Silence of the Lambs*, Lecter specifically states that Gumb/Bill is *not* transgender: “Billy's not a transsexual [*sic*] [...] but he thinks he is, he tries to be.”[13] However, this quick, off-handed distinction (repeated in the film adaptation) is insufficient to counteract

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Gumb/Bill's personification of several harmful stereotypes associated with trans identity—as a killer pathologically driven to steal female skin by force. Harris's characterization of Dolarhyde in *Red Dragon* is similar: like Gumb/Bill, he desires a total transformation of himself, attempting to facilitate his “becoming” the Red Dragon through the domination and victimization of others.

However, Deshane traces how Fuller's show “preserve[s] [...] the emotional core of the source text while actively changing the political and cultural connotations of the tools used to express this core.”[15] This shift towards a more humanized, sympathetic portray is largely achieved through the emphasis that *Hannibal* places on Reba, Dolarhyde's romantic partner, who “accept[s] his identity [and thus] redeem[s] him from the internalized cisgender gaze that depicts trans people as monster or myth, joke or villain, pathetic or deceptive.”[16] This sense of redemption is reinforced rather than invalidated by the altered end of the series—which, as described above, replaces Graham's fear “of becoming just like Hannibal Lecter or the Red Dragon” with a utopic sense of acceptance.[17] Deshane's account encapsulates the conception of *Hannibal* that *Becoming* offers as a whole: as a series which rewrites and reframes misguided cultural scripts surrounding queer and trans identity without ever explicitly cueing that it is doing so, offering *implicit* acceptance in place of *explicit* Othering.



The series' focus on Dolarhyde's romantic partner, Reba, is central to its reimagination of the figure of the serial killer as a site of fear and dread to one of uneasy, sympathetic identification

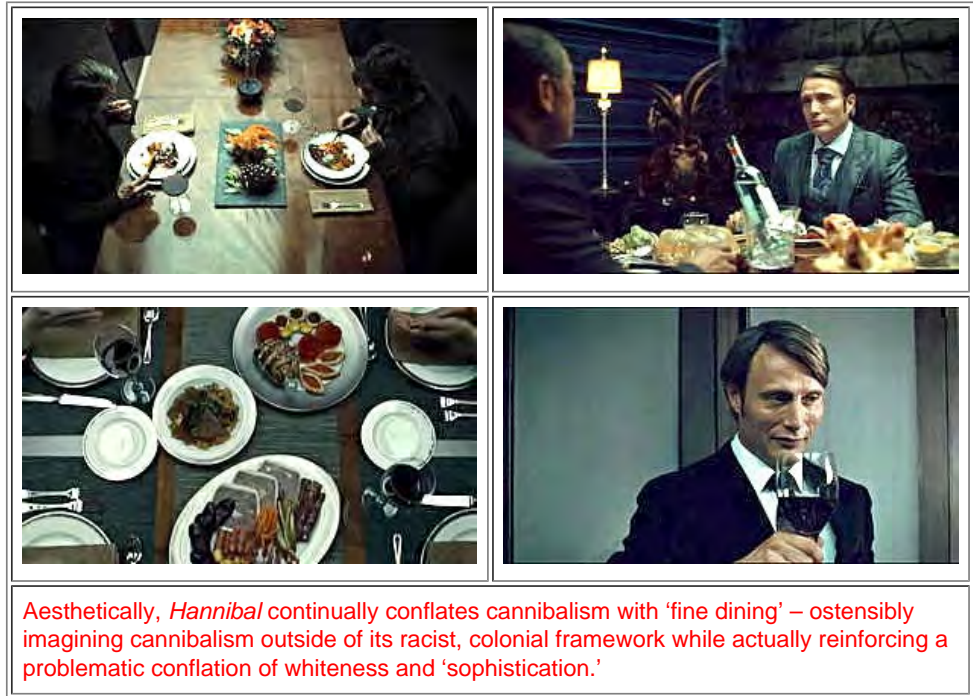
I have not provided a comprehensive overview of the various contributions to *Becoming*; indeed, the sheer breadth and variety of criticism included in this relatively slim volume is a significant part of its charm. In the introduction, the editors suggest that their goal is to “start a conversation between scholars, fans, and those who fall into both categories,” and the resulting collection more than makes up for its broad focus by an infectious tone of enthusiasm.[18] The risk inherent to this approach is falling into hagiography—and certainly, the collection as a whole demonstrates a reverence towards the series that is only reinforced by a short forward by Janice Poon (the series' food stylist) and an interview with Nick Antosca (a writer for the show's third season) conducted by Matthew

Sorrento.

The exception to this rule is one of *Becoming's* strongest essays: “Hannibal the Cannibal: Tracking Colonial Imaginaries,” by Samira Nadkarni and Rukmini Pande. Here, the authors remind readers that the trope of cannibalism is inextricably tied to its colonial origins. They note the ways in which cannibalism has “been [historically] operationalized against entire populations” of Indigenous, Black, and brown people, to justify projects of “imperialism and conquest.”[19] While the figure of Lecter, in all of his incarnations, ostensibly intervenes into this history by situating the ‘monstrous’ condition of cannibalism in a white body, Nadkarni and Pande suggest the series merely reinforces these underlying racial and colonial hierarchies:

“[A]lthough fetishization of nonwhite bodies performing cannibalism informs a significant history of colonial writing, it is rarely presented as intimate, seductive, or desirably powerful within the space of popular consciousness that *Hannibal* occupies.”[20]

In other words, the construction of Lecter as monstrous relies on the fact that Lecter is white *and* a cannibal—the unspoken and troubling assumption being that this contradiction would not exist were he nonwhite. This chapter offers a pertinent reminder that while *Hannibal* offers a fascinating queer and trans reimagination of harmful tropes of pathology, the framework through which it does so is inherently limited in terms of race—in part due to the essential whiteness of the serial killer figure as imagined by popular culture.



Collectively, *Becoming* makes a convincing case for *Hannibal's* usefulness as a text – which, in its engagement with its problematic yet compelling source materials, reveals the absolute limits of queer representation on network TV. There is a sense throughout *Becoming* that *Hannibal* is a text whose possibilities have not yet been fully exhausted, reflected by the fact that most of the essays in the book touch upon the show’s cancellation and fan hopes for a fourth season revival in some way. These analyses often focus upon the final image of the series: a vast expanse of empty water at the bottom of the cliff, where Lecter and Graham have just leapt in an embrace. As suggested by Lori Morimoto, this image “affirm[s] nothing so much as the open-ended possibilities of the writerly text”—and Lecter, like José Esteban Muñoz’s description of queer utopia as “not yet

here,”[21] remains on the horizon, as an absence which can be filled by a fourth season, fanworks, or—as in the case of *Becoming*—a collection of scholarship.[22]

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Notes

1. Mudan Finn and Nielsen provide a brief overview of this corpus in their introduction, including the collection *Eating the Rude: Hannibal Lecter and the Fannibals, Criminals, and Legacy of America's Favorite Cannibal*, edited by Kyle Moody and Nicholas Yanes (Durham, NC: McFarland, forthcoming), and the dedicated special issue *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 35, no. 6 (2018).
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2. Jessica Balanzategui, Naja Later, and Tara Lomax, "Hannibal Lecter's Monstrous Return: The Horror of Seriality in Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*" in *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 37.

3. Balanzategui, Later, and Lomax, "Hannibal Lecter's Monstrous Return," 37.

4. Balanzategui, Later, and Lomax, "Hannibal Lecter's Monstrous Return," 32.

5. Balanzategui, Later, and Lomax, "Hannibal Lecter's Monstrous Return," 50. See also Edelman (2004).

6. Quoted in Balanzategui, Later, and Lomax, "Hannibal Lecter's Monstrous Return," 45.

7. Lori Morimoto, "*Hannibal*: Adaptation and Authorship in the Age of Fan Production," in *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal*, ed. Kavita Mudan Finn and EJ Nielsen (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 261.

8. Morimoto, "*Hannibal*," 266

9. Elle Lewerenz, "Adapt. Evolve. Become: Queering *Red Dragon* in Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*" in *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal*, ed. Kavita Mudan Finn and EJ Nielsen (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 59.

10. Lewerenz, "Adapt. Evolve. Become." 62.

11. Quoted in Lewerenz, "Adapt. Evolve. Become." 69.

12. Lewerenz, "Adapt. Evolve. Become." 66.

13. Thomas Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs* (New York: St. Marten's Paperbacks, 1989), 165.

14. omitted

15. Evelyn Deshane, "The Great Red Dragon: Francis Dolarhyde and Queer Readings of Skin," in *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal*, ed. Kavita Mudan Finn and EJ Nielsen (Syracuse: Syracuse University

Press, 2019), 129.

16. Deshane, "The Great Red Dragon," 140.

17. Deshane, "The Great Red Dragon," 141.

18. Kavita Mudan Finn and EJ Nielsen, "Introduction: A Love Crime," in *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal*, ed. Kavita Mudan Finn and EJ Nielsen (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 6.

19. Samira Nadkarni and Rukmini Pande, "Hannibal the Cannibal: Tracking Colonial Imaginaries," in *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal*, ed. Kavita Mudan Finn and EJ Nielsen (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 146.

20. Nadkarni and Pande, "Hannibal the Cannibal," 147.

21. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

22. Morimoto, "*Hannibal*," 278.

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Beyond the gaze: seeing and being seen in contemporary queer media

by [Nicole Morse](#) and [Lauren Herold](#)



In *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015) and in the “San Junipero” episode of *Black Mirror* (2016), shot reverse-shot editing patterns show queer women looking toward their lovers by representing them looking directly into the lens.



Maura (Jeffrey Tambor) looks directly into the lens in Joey (Jill) Soloway’s *Transparent* (2014–2019). Within Soloway’s work, the female direct look back has a complicated status, as Nicole Morse explores in the video essay [Some People Like Hearing Sad Things](#) (2018).

In recent years, media producers like Lena Dunham, Amy Schumer, and Joey (Jill) Soloway have discussed their work in terms of a desire to subvert “the male gaze” and invent “the female gaze” in Hollywood. These maker/theorists take up ideas from Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” while leaving aside the manifesto’s specific commitments to formal analysis and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Like Mulvey’s own work, which began as a public talk, these discussions are grounded in issues of practice. Such contemporary reformulations of the male and female gaze are part of a decades-long revival of “gaze theory” [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) as a tool for feminist media praxis across popular culture, online journalism, and feminist media production. Soloway, who is the creator of female-centered films and television shows including *The United States of Tara* (2009–2011), *Afternoon Delight* (2013), and *Transparent* (2014–2019), has been particularly vocal about the potential for a female gaze to spark feminist revolution against the patriarchy. [2] With a newly published memoir that *The New York Times* says “speaks so urgently to our cultural moment,” [3] Soloway’s work is popularly regarded as a significant contribution to a period that television and film critics have hailed as a watershed “golden age” for women on screen. [4] Amid the #MeToo movement’s revelations about sexual violence in the entertainment industry and in the culture at large, Soloway has emerged as a leader in the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements and frequently speak publicly about social justice issues. They recently co-founded 5050by2020, an initiative designed to promote equity for underrepresented minorities in Hollywood. Despite the fact that *Transparent* star Jeffrey Tambor was accused of sexual harassment by several trans coworkers, [5] casting some doubt upon the production’s efficacy as a political project, Soloway credits their show with shifting the landscape in Hollywood toward justice for women and LGBTQ people. Calling this transformation in media production practices and content a spiritual mission [6] and naming their company Topple Productions—as in “topple the patriarchy,” Soloway declared:

“We’re essentially inventing the female gaze right now—not just myself, but also showrunners like Jenji Kohan. We’re trying to show sex and desire from a female vantage point, and my ultimate hope is that I can inspire women, queer and trans people everywhere to join in and tell their truths about desire, identity and sexuality from unconventional perspectives.” [7]

In Soloway’s language, words that evoke the visual—showing, perspective—are paired with the phrase “tell their truths,” complicating the straightforward visibility of the gaze with the bodily resonance of the voice.

On the one hand, much of Soloway’s theory of the “female gaze” is, at best,



Brandon Teena (Hilary Swank) looks into the lens and toward his double in this shot reverse-shot sequence from *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999).





As Carol (Cate Blanchett) turns her head, her eyes connect briefly with the lens as she sees her lover Therese (Rooney Mara).

simplistic, and at worst, gender essentialist. Yet their turn to the body, and to senses beyond sight, offers something valuable. Describing the importance of the emotional environment that a director creates on set, Soloway's female gaze invokes a transfer of emotions from the director to the crew to the screen and finally to the audience. As a result, this female gaze depends more upon profilmic experiences and essentialist accounts of identity than on formal qualities in the finished work. Given that Soloway concentrates upon the on-set emotions of media creators, it is challenging to determine how precisely this produces an actual aesthetic experience for Soloway's audiences. Closer examination of Soloway's claims suggests that this theory of the female gaze is actually less a theory about structures of looking and instead much closer to a revision of auteur theory.[8] Soloway's "female gaze" decenters some of those creators who are typically centered by auteurist accounts of media (white cisgender males) but still does not offer clarity about how this new, feminist auteurism generates—on a formal level—alternatives to dominant structures of looking. At the same time, Soloway's interest in emotion is an affective corrective to the exclusively visual model of the gaze that originally emerged in feminist film theory. Such a possibility is also encapsulated in Soloway's provocative description of the female gaze as a mode of "feeling seeing." [9]



Soloway is far from the only person to loosely use the terminology of the gaze or the look to describe dynamics that are not precisely about structures of looking. For example, Jack Halberstam analyzes a shot reverse-shot sequence from *Boys Don't Cry* (1999)[10] to argue that a preliminary version of a "transgender look" emerges when the protagonist is shown watching himself being assaulted; Halberstam reads this doubled look as deconstructing the conventional power dynamics of shot reverse-shot sequences.[12] Ultimately, Halberstam identifies a fuller realization of the transgender look in the film *By Hook or By Crook* (2001). [13] Here, like Soloway, Halberstam de-prioritizes the formal framing and narrativizing of looking relations in favor of production decisions that primarily concern the queer identities of the producers and the film's mise en scene, its compelling representation of "the San Francisco subcultural worlds that they inhabit." [14] Yet what if we take seriously the idea of "feeling seeing"—alongside Halberstam's insight about the critical necessity of deconstructing conventional shot reverse-shot sequences—and use these to explore how media construct alternative structures of looking? In scholarship, "feeling seeing" might be most closely understood in dialogue with Laura U. Marks' theory of haptic visuality, which moves beyond the gendered structure of the gaze to examine how formal strategies make the surface of the screen seem almost tactile. Yet Marks also does not analyze the actual structure of looking relations on screen, focusing primarily on the spectator's experience of the screen as something textured and tactile.

In this article, we turn to the structure of the shot reverse-shot sequence and we analyze the looking relations that emerge from queer encounters in *Carol* (2015), [15] *Moonlight* (2016), [16] and the "San Junipero" episode of *Black Mirror* (2016) [17] to argue that the direct look into the lens can trouble any binary division of the look into active/passive or subject/object. In these sequences, the direct look is paired with formal techniques that highlight the surface of the image and shift the temporality of the scene; such techniques include slow-motion, superimposition, rack focus, elliptical editing, distorted diegetic sound, and haunting non-diegetic scores.



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| Kevin (André Holland) looks directly into the lens during a dream sequence in <i>Moonlight</i> (Barry Jenkins, 2016). | Kelly (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) flirts with her soon-to-be lover by looking directly in the lens in "San Junipero." |

Though performance is also a crucial element of these sequences, this article focuses on formal strategies that produce an aesthetic experience reminiscent of Halberstam's description of the transgender look: an opening up to an elsewhere, to alternative times and spaces.[18] However, in contrast to Halberstam's account of how a film like *Boys Don't Cry* deconstructs shot reverse-shot sequences through violence and dissociation, the scenes we examine here intervene in the conventional shot reverse-shot structure in the name of queer love, desire, and intimacy. Affect is central to the spectatorial experience of the alternative structures of looking that emerge in these sequences. To borrow Soloway's phrase, this mode of "feeling seeing" poses a challenge to the dominant dynamics of the gaze. No longer concerned with who is looking and who is looked at, in these sequences the characters and the audience experience the mutuality and intimacy of seeing and being seen.

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| Focus, colored filters, and distortion draw attention to the surface of the image in <i>Carol</i> . | According to Halberstam, the lighting effects produced by this time-lapse sequence represent an opening up to alternative possibilities before the sexual assault scenes in <i>Boys Don't Cry</i> . |

From Mulvey's "male gaze" to Soloway's "feeling seeing"

When framed as the "female gaze," contemporary popular discourse about resistant media-making practices tends to misread the promise of academic feminist film theory while recreating some of its pitfalls. Soloway's own definition



This shot reverse-shot sequence from *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) offers an exemplary model of the male gaze. First, Jimmy Stewart's character L. B. Jefferies looks off screen right and out his window. The next shot shows the object of gaze: a scantily clad dancer framed for his look by the window. In the third shot, the sequence returns to the first framing, completing the alignment of the three looks of camera, character, and audience.



In Josef Von Sternberg's *Der Blaue Engel*

of a female gaze is no different—until they introduce the suggestion that this resistant gaze involves “feeling seeing.” Soloway associates the female gaze with the cinematic and televisual exploration of the desires, identities, and sexualities of women, queer people, and trans people, but they also present a world that is rigidly binary and divided between men and women, masculine and feminine energies, violence and nurture, recalling stereotypes or clichés about the theories associated with second wave feminism. For example, Soloway has declared:

“The male gaze ... necessarily divides us.... The wounded masculine divides us to feel power and when we reclaim that, we repair the divided feminine by speaking and having voices and by picking up the camera.... The world, the matriarchal revolution, is dependent on female voices and speaking out loud. Please keep making things.” [19]

Through its essentialism, Soloway's female gaze doesn't envision resistance to patriarchal dominance as something formal, aesthetic, or traceable in the media object itself. Instead, Soloway locates the source of the female gaze in the bodies—and specifically the voices—of female media producers.

While their articulation does a disservice to the rich possibilities that can emerge from resistant gazes, Soloway's turn to more tactile senses such as the voice can be mobilized as a corrective to the dominance of vision during the last forty-five years of theories of dominant or hegemonic structures of looking. After all, these theories attempt to describe a medium that is *not* purely visual by only examining the visual register. In 1975, amid the second wave feminist movement, the rise of academic film studies, and the increase in independent film making, [20] Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” established the concept of the male gaze as a formal technique that is primarily—if not exclusively—visual. Mobilizing psychoanalytic theory “as a political weapon,” [21] Mulvey interrogates a visual economy in which the look of the male character is aligned with the looks of the camera and the audience, subjecting the female character to a “controlling male gaze” [22] that, in its purest form, often involves a shot reverse-shot sequence in which the man looks, the woman is displayed, and the film returns again to an image of the man looking. Mulvey asserts that an alternative is possible through avant-garde techniques that would break up hegemonic cinematic codes, [23] although she does not refer to this as a “female gaze.” In fact, gaze theory's genesis in Lacanian psychoanalysis and apparatus theory actually forecloses any possibility of a female gaze, and only constructs the male gaze as a fictional position that the spectator occupies to stave off the threat of castration.

Following Mulvey, feminist film theorists have expanded upon her articulation of the male gaze and the subordination of female subjectivity in classical Hollywood cinema, continuously returning to the question of whether a female gaze is possible. This is not only a crucial question for theorists, but also, as Mulvey passionately argued, for creators (like Soloway), who must develop techniques that make resistant and alternative media possible. Yet as with any resistant practice, it's also critical to examine how hegemonic codes continuously recuperate attempts to subvert them. For example, because Mulvey's article neglects female spectatorship, E. Ann Kaplan analyzes films in which male stars are positioned as erotic visual objects for, presumably, female spectators [24]; at the same time, as Kaplan argues, the positions of subject and object of the look remain gendered as masculine and feminine, regardless of the sex or gender of the people occupying those roles. [25] In another version of resistance to the male gaze, drawing on Deleuzian and pre-Oedipal concepts of masochism, Gaylyn Studlar examines the structures of looking in Von Sternberg's films starring Marlene Dietrich. Studlar argues that Dietrich subverts the power of the male gaze because she “is not the passive object of the controlling look. She looks back.” [26]

(1930), Marlene Dietrich's character Lola Lola seems to look nearly into the lens as she is framed in a low angle, dominating the frame, yet she is still displayed for the audience's visual pleasure.



The film *Magic Mike XXL* (Gregory Jacobs, 2015), a comedy about male strippers aimed at heterosexual female viewers, offers an apt illustration of how formal strategies and narrative structures often negate seeming reversals of the male gaze. In this sequence, Joe Manganiello as Big Dick Richie is challenged by his friends to dance erotically in order to get the attention of a gas station clerk. A close-up of the clerk looking seems to align us with her gaze.



The reverse shot shows Big Dick Richie from the clerk's perspective, seemingly performing for her.



Instead of completing the shot reverse-shot sequence by returning to the clerk, however, the next shot is approximately 45 degrees to one side.

Yet even as she looks back, Dietrich remains an object of male desire rather than the bearer of a female gaze. Ultimately, as Mary Ann Doane concludes, reversals of the gendered economy of vision always “signify the mechanism of reversal itself,” re-inscribing rather than offering an alternative to the male gaze.[27] Such formulations are then echoed in Soloway's contemporary assessment of the male gaze in cinema: “Movies are the male gaze. Movies show how it feels to be a man.”[28]

But is the hegemonic gaze truly this totalizing in its power? As other theorists have turned toward historically grounded accounts of spectatorship, they have questioned the totalizing nature of gaze theory,[29] along with its ahistorical essentialism. For example, analyzing the importance of female consumers and fans in the creation of the star system, Miriam Hansen challenges theoretical paradigms that subordinate female spectators, and through examining fan magazines, interviews, and films, Hansen argues that the “desiring female gaze” solicited by Rudolph Valentino films points to an ambivalent female spectatorship, suggesting possible alternative organizations of erotic systems of vision.[30] Similarly exploring the agency of female spectators, while calling attention to the fact that feminist film criticism has disregarded black female spectatorship, bell hooks demonstrates that critical black female spectators generate an “oppositional gaze”[31] through which black women can call into question the “white male's capacity to gaze, define, and know.”[32] For Chris Straayer, the question of the male gaze cannot be asked without “the equally pertinent question ‘is the gaze heterosexual?’” Straayer argues that homosexual—and particularly lesbian—viewers provide “multiple ‘deviant’ subjectivities” that undermine heteronormative structures of looking.[33] Finally, Linda Williams asks “whether there has ever been such a thing as continuous tradition of a centered, unitary, distanced, and objectifying gaze.”[34] While Williams still articulates the need for analysis of looking relations on screen, she writes that

“any theory of spectatorship must be now historically specific, grounded in the specific spectatorial practices, the specific narratives, and the specific attractions of the mobilized and embodied gaze of viewers.”[35]

However, in popular culture, discourse about dominant and resistant gazes persistently re-inscribes ahistorical essentialism and the dominance of vision. As Soloway continues to expand their advocacy for, and investment in, alternative media production,[36] their conception of the gaze, derived from a reductionist account of Mulvey's insights,[37] impacts how the resistant and radical potential of contemporary media production is conceived.

For Soloway, the female gaze depends upon “female creators.” But that category is never precisely defined. And even though Soloway at times suggests that this category includes everyone besides cisgender men, at other moments they associate womanhood with the stereotypical experiences of people assigned female at birth, such as menstruation,[38] indicating a more binary and essentialist understanding of gender than one might otherwise expect from a non-binary producer who works extensively with transgender artists. Often Soloway's account of the female gaze approaches questions of form, as they report that the female gaze captures what it feels like to be the object of the gaze and conveys the power of returning the look[39]; they also talk about how their work showcases “unconventional perspectives” and “a female vantage point.”[40] As we will discuss, Halberstam points out that approaches like this still preserve the centrality of the hegemonic gaze since these structures of looking are addressed to those who occupy a dominant or “conventional” perspective.

In the end, Soloway's description of the potential for a female gaze is broad



A reverse shot reveals that the audience is now aligned with the perspective of the other men, rather than the clerk.



When the sequence returns to Big Dick Richie, the camera remains off to the side at the 45 degree angle.



As Big Dick Richie continues dancing, the axis of action is between him and his real audience: the other men.

enough that it is not based in structures of looking. Instead, it displays an auteurist interest in seeking evidence of the creator's influence on the finished product. In a master class they offered at the Toronto International Film Festival on "The Female Gaze" Soloway described the male and female gazes as bound to the identities and bodies of media creators, with the female creator's influence emerging primarily in writing and direction, rather than in other production roles (including editing, an area in which women have a slightly greater presence than many other areas[41]). Focusing on pre-production and production, they narrate how they work with their male cinematographer on set so that

"he's not capturing...he's playing the action of melting or oozing or allowing. He's feeling something in his body that we have chosen together while he's holding the camera. And so you may notice when you see this kind of filmmaking that you feel more." [42]

Although Soloway briefly defines "feeling seeing" as "a *subjective camera* that attempts to get inside the protagonist," [43] they don't clarify how a "subjective camera" is produced and traceable in the finished project. Instead, the primary determination of this mode is the spectatorial reaction which Soloway describes thus:

"I can tell a woman wrote and directed it because I feel held but [*sic*] something that is invested in my FEELING in my body, the emotions are being prioritized over the action." [44]

Focused on cultivating pro-filmic, on-set emotions in their crew and a kind of feminine essence that supposedly emerges from this emotional state and translates to the screen, Soloway's female gaze is, ultimately, a theory of auteurship. It is infused with the fantasy that the spectator's role is to sense the hand of the author in the final image and, troublingly, it reinforces a stereotypically binary model of gender in which emotions are overdetermined as female. And yet Soloway's turn to *feeling* does ask us to complicate the way we understand looking relations in the *audio-visual* medium of moving image media.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Seeing and being seen: shot reverse-shot in *Carol* and “San Junipero”



This sequence moves from a wide shot in real time that shows Brandon being assaulted (12) to a close-up of Brandon where the space around him drops out of focus and into darkness (13). His position within the space also changes abruptly, indicating the shift to an out-of-body experience. After he looks up (05), he sees his unharmed double looking back at him, isolated by a spotlight (14). The subsequent shot shows what that double sees, and depicts the attackers assaulting Brandon, once again in a wide shot (15). However, this wide-shot retains the spotlight effect, indicating that it is part of Brandon's dissociative experience.

In contrast to Soloway's female gaze, Mulvey's male gaze depends upon specific formal strategies, particularly editing techniques. As a set of formal strategies, this gaze can be challenged and undermined because it is vulnerable to formal revisions, resistance, and reinterpretation. Although the films that we discuss here are much more conventional than the kind of oppositional filmmaking Mulvey called for, we are interested in examining whether visual pleasure *is* possible rather than asserting that the only resistant possibility is destroying visual pleasure. Here, we examine how two sequences from *Carol* and “San Junipero” complicate the conventional structure of the gaze—and expand upon Halberstam's account of the significance of such interventions into shot reverse-shot structures—through a specific formal strategy: the direct look into the lens. This direct look interrupts those editing patterns that might otherwise establish the male gaze.

According to Mulvey, there are two broad tendencies of the male gaze, and each responds differently to the threat of castration posed by the image of the woman. On the one hand, fetishization responds to the threat of castration by fixating on parts rather than wholes, and this operation of the male gaze can be seen in sequences in which the woman's body is broken up by montage into fragments. On the other hand, sadistic voyeurism grapples with the threat of castration by investigating the woman, punishing her, and subjecting her to a controlling gaze in which the looks of the camera, the spectator, and the male character are united. [45] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) This latter effect is often accomplished through shot reverse-shot editing. As Halberstam describes it, shot reverse-shot editing “suture[es] the viewer to a usually male gaze,” [46] producing both the oppressive effect of the male gaze—as well as the grounds where it might be contested.

For Halberstam, the film *Boys Don't Cry* challenges the shot reverse-shot structure of the hetero- and cis-sexist male gaze. Within the film, there is a key sequence that Halberstam argues stages a transgender look through deconstructing hegemonic structures of seeing, especially shot reverse-shot structure. By doing so, he contends, the film “reveals the ideological content of the male and female gazes” [47] and creates the transgender look as a look that grants access to an “alternative vision of time and space.” [48] In this sequence, the trans character Brandon Teena is trapped in a bathroom, being violently interrogated, stripped, and sexually assaulted by two cisgender men who demand to know the “truth” about Brandon's body. Amid this violence, Halberstam writes, “shots from Brandon's point of view reveal him to be in the grips of an ‘out-of-body’ and out-of-time experience” in which he sees himself, spot-lit, standing just outside of this space of violence and terror. Instead of suturing the viewer to the looks of the two assaulters and thus establishing a male gaze, Halberstam describes how the scene drifts into slow motion and cuts between Brandon and his double, as each spot-lit Brandon looks at the other. [49] Part of the moment's power comes from its radical resistance to the voyeurism of the male gaze. By aligning our look with Brandon's own look toward himself, the film refuses to interpolate us into the sadistic voyeurism of investigation and assault.

This moment is undoubtedly powerful, and Halberstam shows the significance of Brandon's look toward himself, as well as the way that the film connects this look—and its vision of alternate times and spaces—to a female look that belongs to Brandon's girlfriend. Nonetheless, this moment can never be separated from its profound violence. This violence lies primarily in the content of the scene, but it also extends to Halberstam's attempts to claim Brandon's look toward his double as a preliminary model for a transgender look in cinema. Because this instance of the transgender look emerges only through assault and, arguably, a dissociative response to trauma, this account of the transgender look is bound to violence. Moreover, it assumes that the transgender look always comes from a split or divided subject, reiterating the trope that transgender people are “half man, half woman,” and furthering the postmodern fantasy that transgender subjects are uniquely flexible and fluid, forever moving between or beyond stable subject positions.[50]

Later in his essay, Halberstam abandons his attempt to locate the transgender look in formal structures like shot reverse-shot sequences, instead describing how the film *By Hook or By Crook* uses character, plot, setting, and other tools to present a queer world in which gender transgression is not spectacularized.[51] Though much clearer than Soloway's “feeling seeing,” this account still remains far from the actual activity of looking and does not address the cinematic tools that guide us, moment by moment as we watch, in how and where to look. This is unfortunate, as *By Hook or By Crook* features a number of sequences that do, in fact, work with and on shot-reverse-shot structures.



This shot reverse-shot sequence shows Shy (Silas Howard) and Valentine (Harry Dodge) looking at each other and, simultaneously, into the lens during their initial meeting in *By Hook or By Crook* (2002). Interestingly, even though this sequence uses shot reverse-shot editing patterns to show the two characters as complements and inverted mirrors of each other, and even though it also takes place in response to transphobic/queerphobic violence, Halberstam doesn't discuss this scene in his analysis of how the film produces a transgender look.

Nonetheless, both of Halberstam's examples of the transgender look feature an exchange between two trans or queer subject positions, rather than interactions that turn upon an unequal power dynamic. As such, Halberstam's vision of the transgender look offers something distinct from accounts in which the dominant gaze can only be countered through interventions that seek to communicate the discomfort and pain of being subjected to this gaze, as opposed to producing an alternative that exceeds the mechanism of critique or reversal.

Although Halberstam is outlining a “transgender look,” the broader context of the chapter, which appears in Halberstam's monograph *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, suggests that Halberstam's theory of looking relations in cinema is less about a specifically delimited trans identity than it is an attempt to trace the power that emerges from encounters between queer and trans people, encounters that exist outside of (rather than in opposition to) the “straight world.”[52] Both *Carol* and “San Junipero” offer vivid examples of such encounters, narratively and formally. Telling stories of queer women's love, their use of the direct look builds an alternative form of looking upon the

foundation of the shot reverse-shot sequence. No longer sutured to the position of one character looking at another, these sequences thrust the spectator into the circuit of the looks exchanged between queer lovers. Set in New York City in the 1950s, *Carol* (adapted from Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Price of Salt*) tells the story of a forbidden love affair between Therese, a department store clerk and aspiring photographer, and Carol, a wealthy older married woman. "San Junipero," an episode of Netflix's science fiction anthology series *Black Mirror*, narrates the love story of the introverted Yorkie and the extroverted Kelly, two elderly women who meet in a virtual reality world in which they can be young forever.



This point of view shot depicts the moment when Therese spots Carol, who doesn't yet realize Therese has arrived.

In *Carol*, the direct look into the lens represents the satisfying culmination of a sequence that repeatedly toys with the audience's desire to experience the intimate reunion of the lesbian lovers Carol and Therese. Baited by false point-of-view shots and nearly direct looks into the lens, the audience anticipates the moment when these near misses will be superseded by true connection. As Therese arrives at a restaurant to meet her estranged lover Carol, the camera initially follows Therese in profile, panning along with her as she navigates the crowded room. Then, as she pauses to look for Carol, she turns and faces the camera. As she looks from side to side, glancing just past the lens as she seeks her lover, the scene cuts to a subjective camera that conveys Therese's searching look, hesitating and jerking slightly as it pans, tilts, pauses, and moves on.

As this shot lands on Carol, talking to a friend, the sequence cuts back to Therese, with the camera pushing in slowly and shifting subtly until she is again captured almost head-on.



Following the point of view shot



... the camera moves to the left and moves in



... until Therese's eyes almost connect with the lens.

The music rises, a melody that expresses forward drive and longing, and the diegetic sound drops away as the scene drifts into slow motion. Therese looks just past the lens, blinks slowly, and then as if drawn by the soundtrack, begins walking forward, toward Carol and toward the camera. The following shot appears to recreate the subjective camera from earlier in the sequence, especially in its halting, stuttering movement forward and to the side.

However, then the camera drifts over a table, moving through space in a way that Therese never could.



The camera is no longer literally capturing Therese's point of view as it floats across tables, seemingly drawn toward Carol.

This impossible movement conveys the urgency of Therese's desire and determination to approach Carol.

Suddenly, it becomes clear that the audience is the third-party present in the scene, enabled by the camera to move and look in a way that the character cannot. Cutting back to Therese, who once again looks just past the lens, the camera tracks backwards before her, alternating between this shot and the forward tracking shot that continues to seek out Carol.



As the sequence continues, the camera remains between Therese and Carol, retreating in front of Therese as she moves forward.



And so the camera pushes in on Carol to match Therese's movements.

As the camera approaches Carol's table, Carol looks just past the camera and past Therese as she turns her head from right to left and then moves her eyes from left to right, heightening our anticipation of the moment when Carol will notice Therese.



Staging ensures that Carol does not see Therese even as she turns her head ...



... passing waiter creating a wipe that blocks Carol ...



.... from looking toward the lens and toward Therese.



As the camera continues pushing in on Carol's table, she shifts her eyes once more—and looks directly in the lens. Cutting almost immediately to Therese, who looks just past the lens, the sequence continues toying with the audience's desire to see Carol seeing Therese. At last, the final shot of the film delivers this moment of recognition, as the camera pushes in on Carol who looks directly in the lens, smiling.

Rather than a shot reverse-shot sequence that aligns the camera and the spectator's look with Therese looking at Carol or Carol looking at Therese, this sequence triangulates the look between Therese, the camera/spectator, and Carol, initially aligning our look with Therese's searching gaze before disarticulating these looks through the false subjective camera. In the final shot, these positions once again coincide, but not in order to establish either Therese or Carol as the agent of the look.



As Carol's eyes connect with the lens at last, the camera continues to serve as the link between the two women as ...



... Therese realizes she has been seen. The final shot of the film continues ...



... to align the audience's position with Therese's look, and her experience of being seen by Carol.

Instead, this sequence uses a mobile camera and a fluidly shifting point of view to disarticulate the overdetermination of looking and objectification. As the fourth wall breaks down and we find ourselves face to face with Carol, this sequence solicits and then satisfies a desire that we may not even have recognized before this moment: the desire to be seen.

In "San Junipero," the direct look reveals that shot reverse-shot sequences can defy objectification in favor of mutual recognition—of seeing and being seen—although in this case both characters look toward each other by looking into the lens and at the audience. The scene begins at a bar, as Kelly and Yorkie meet for the first time. A vivacious party girl, Kelly drags the shy and nervous Yorkie onto the dance floor. As they dance, initially captured in a medium long shot, the camera cuts back and forth between them, establishing a conventional shot reverse-shot sequence.



Through the shot reverse-shot sequence ...



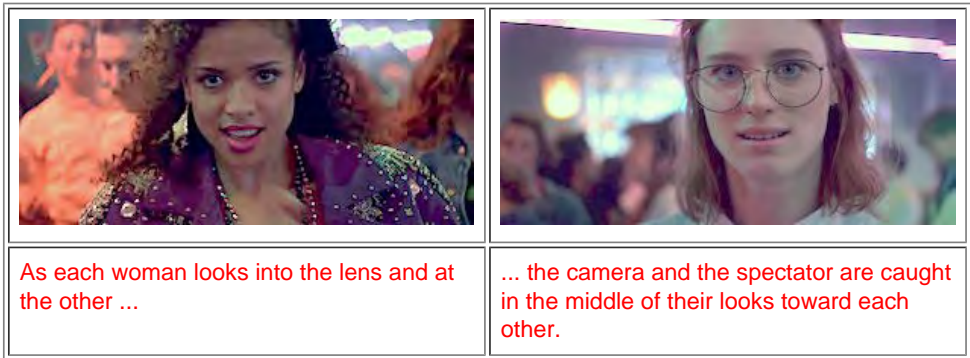
... the camera moves closer to the dancing couple ...



... preparing for the intense intimacy of the direct looks into the lens.

At each cut, the camera seems to move closer, until Yorkie is shown, at an angle, in medium close-up. The next shot, a medium close-up of Kelly, crosses the director's line, placing the camera directly in front of Kelly. As she dances, snapping her head from one side to the other, her eyes briefly connect with the lens several times, and then they hold our gaze—and presumably Yorkie's—for several flirtatious seconds.





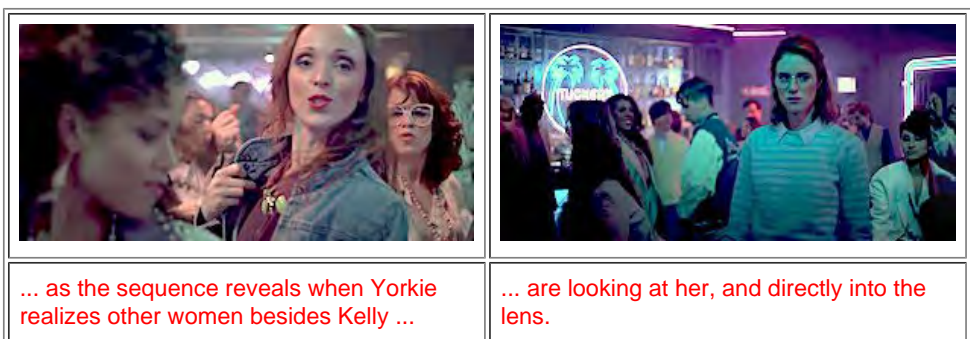
The following shot moves closer still, to a close-up on Yorkie who looks back, directly into the lens, as the sequence drifts into slow motion. At first, the image slows while the dance music remains at speed, but at the next cut, to a close-up of Kelly turning her head again to look directly into the lens, the sound changes. Slowing and distorting, the diegetic dance music is overwhelmed by a non-diegetic score as Yorkie once again returns Kelly's look in close-up.

Then this moment of intense intimacy—of seeing and being seen by each other—breaks down as Yorkie looks away. Not yet ready for this kind of connection, Yorkie looks around her, and a subjective camera shows her fear: other women on the dance floor looking right at her, staring into the lens with their own flirtatious and knowing glances.

Although this moment of mutual recognition is thus tempered by a more objectifying structure of looking, conveying Yorkie's deep discomfort with being the object of other women's desire, Kelly's and Yorkie's exchange of direct looks produces the possibility for something more. Caught right between the two women, the camera and the audience look at and with both characters, deconstructing the subject-object binary and discovering a way of looking anew. In these moments, something happens that might well be described as “feeling seeing.”



The direct look's intimacy is both moving and frightening ...



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Flung out of space and time: sound and the direct look



As Halberstam discusses, *Boys Don't Cry* includes a number of sequences where the visual track transforms diegetic lighting effects into surreal visions of a world beyond homophobia and transphobia through either fast- or slow-motion playback. This sequence follows Brandon's look and imagines alternative worlds using fast motion, but the visuals aren't the only transformative effect. The soundtrack features distorted electric guitar and heavy cymbals.

While it could be tempting to counter the vagueness of “feeling seeing” with a rigid emphasis on the easy-to-measure visual register, Soloway’s formulation does capture the fact that representations of looking—like those described above—feature sensorial dimensions that exceed the visual. This can be partly explored through Laura U. Marks’ theory of “haptic visuality,” but the intense intimacy and presence that Marks gestures to in her work on hapticity is not limited to the image. In the sequences described above, sound significantly transforms the shot reverse-shot structure of the look. The role of sound in looking relations can be traced back to Halberstam’s account of the transgender look and it can be further explicated through Irina Leimbacher’s theory of “haptic listening,” which explores the impact of mutuality in acts of listening.[53] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Though Leimbacher examines documentary speech, her description of reciprocity in listening highlights how formal strategies produce alternative ways of encountering others.[54]

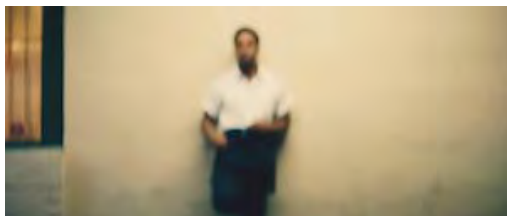
An attention to sound offers another opportunity to expand upon Halberstam’s article on the transgender look. Halberstam himself does not address how sound supports alternative structures of looking that open up to an elsewhere, but in *Boys Don't Cry* (similar to the scenes described above from *Carol* and “San Junipero”) diegetic sound drops away and the scene shifts into slow motion during the out of body and out of time experience in which Brandon looks at and with his double. In these sequences, and in the sequences discussed below, the possibility of seeing and being seen is not only traceable in the visual register but emerges as an affective experience produced through the interaction of image and sound. It is not enough to concretize alternative structures of looking through identifying *visual* formal features, such as editing strategies, the direct look, and the use of subjective camera angles. Instead, it is necessary to examine how image and audio work together, along with effects that manipulate time, in order to understand how certain cinematic exchanges create the possibility of seeing and being seen.

Two sequences from *Carol* and *Moonlight* use formal strategies to produce encounters that are no longer about looking and being looked at, but rather about contact, closeness, and desire. In these moments, the direct look toward the loved one is captured through dreamlike sequences that feature elliptical editing, slow motion cinematography, and haunting non-diegetic music, as well as elements that draw our attention to the surface of the image (superimposition, out-of-focus shots, and swirling cigarette smoke). Briefly, “San Junipero” includes such techniques as well, highlighting the surface of the image through throwing the image slightly out of focus during the closeups of Yorkie. In *Carol* and *Moonlight*, however, the use of such strategies is far more extensive, as the films employ visual and aural strategies in order to generate a spectatorial experience that is less about the necessary distance that makes the sense of sight possible and closer to the tactile, textured experience of touch. Additionally, through audio manipulation that draws our attention to the texture rather than the content of the sound, these sequences stress the phenomenological experience of encounter.



These images of lights and a blurry cityscape bridge a sex scene into a car ride in *Boys Don't Cry*, and in addition to these evocative visuals that Halberstam describes, the sequence features a barely audible high-pitched tone overlaid on rock music.

Images from *Moonlight*:



Repeatedly, the camera racks focus dramatically during Black's dream, creating a rhythmic

Mutuality and reciprocity are central to both Marks' haptic visuality and Leimbacher's haptic listening, although Leimbacher provides more detail about the formal strategies that make haptic listening possible. As Marks describes—admittedly writing about intercultural and experimental cinema rather than Oscar contenders like *Carol* and *Moonlight*—alternative cinemas can resist the dominant structure of the gaze through haptic visuality, or “a way of seeing that does not posit a violent distance between the seer and the object.”[55] Opposing haptic visuality to optical visuality, Marks argues that the latter stresses distance and difference, the very dynamics that support the subject-object binary that structures the male gaze. In contrast,

“haptic visuality invites a kind of identification in which there is a mutual dissolving of viewer and viewed, subject and object; where looking is not about power but about yielding; or even that the object takes on more power than the subject.”[56]

Such non-objectifying relations are at the heart of Leimbacher's haptic listening, which she describes emerging from formal “strategies that encourage us to listen to the flow and process of the ‘saying’ rather than focusing solely on the ‘said’ of speech.”[57] Through “creating a space for and even magnifying ... melodies, tonalities, timbres, and rhythms” the formal qualities of cinematic sound can “transform how and what we listen to when we listen to others and to ourselves.”[58]

Taken together, haptic visuality and haptic listening help unpack how cinematic form can reconstitute representations of looking relations to make alternative ways of seeing possible. The dreamlike sequences from *Moonlight* and *Carol* that we describe below could perhaps be read as examples of the kind of fetishistic fragmentation that Mulvey describes as one way the male gaze responds to the threat of castration, for in each sequence the body of the loved one is captured through noticeable, obvious cuts that highlight specific features, especially the mouth. Yet while Mulvey writes that such fragmentation is the essence of fetishistic scopophilia, especially when accompanied by filters, effects, and other techniques that draw attention to the surface of the image, the sequences Mulvey highlights exclude any representation of looking relations, instead presenting “the image in direct erotic rapport with the spectator.”[59] By contrast, in the sequences we discuss here, the look of the audience is aligned with the look of one character while the direct look back combines with the manipulation of sound and image to produce an experience of haptic visuality and haptic listening that undoes the subject-object relationship of the gaze.

In *Moonlight*, the dreamlike sequence is a literal dream, taking place in the third act after the protagonist, now going by the name of Black, gets a call from his childhood friend, Kevin. Structured in three distinct acts, *Moonlight* explores the experiences and struggles of Chiron, a Black gay man living in poverty in Florida. As children and young men, Chiron and Kevin had been close despite their very different personalities and had had a fleeting sexual encounter. After receiving the unexpected call from Kevin, which comes with an invitation to visit Kevin at the diner where he now works, Black lies back in his bed, and, as the tight focus on his face leaves the rest of the image blurry, a strange rhythmic sound emerges, eventually overtaking the diegetic audio as Black falls asleep. As the sound shifts from a percussive beat to the low resonance of a stringed instrument, we enter Black's dream of this prospective visit.

In slow motion, from a disembodied point of view that nonetheless feels like

alternation in the visual register that corresponds with the sound track to produce an effect like a pulsing heartbeat.



Time is nonlinear in the dream, as the cigarette abruptly appears across a jump cut.

Black's dream perspective, we see Kevin taking a smoke break outside his diner. The camera is mobile, pushing in toward Kevin and racking focus in a frontal shot that shows Kevin leaning against a solid yellow concrete wall. A cut introduces a profile shot in which lights from the street create a sparkling and out-of-focus background behind Kevin.

The next cut is a jump cut, as the camera repositions slightly, and Kevin suddenly has a cigarette between his lips. Swinging around Kevin at a low angle, the shot lingers until he begins breathing out smoke that curls across the screen before a cut back to the first profile shot eliminates both the cigarette and the smoke from the frame—while bringing back the dazzling lights of the cars against the nighttime darkness. As the music swells and the instrumentation becomes more complex, Kevin turns his head toward the camera and looks directly into the lens. His lips open slowly, sensuously, and smoke pours from his mouth, spreading across the screen as Kevin bites his lower lip.

Breaking with the intensity of Kevin's look into the lens, another elliptical cut moves once again to the frontal shot. Here, Kevin's head is suddenly tipped back, and he breathes out another cloud of smoke, time looping as the sequence shows us over and over the second half of the act of taking a drag from a cigarette, eliminating the cigarette itself from the frame. As this frontal shot continues, Kevin lowers his head slowly until his eyes connect once again with the lens. Once again, while holding our look, he bites his lower lip.

A final elliptical cut shows Kevin walking away from the camera in slow motion before Black awakens from this dream.



After taking a single drag from the cigarette, Kevin breathes out smoke repeatedly, in additional examples of the dream's nonlinear temporality.



Time remains nonlinear as elliptical editing moves from Kevin's direct look into the lens to his slow motion exit from the scene.

In this sequence, Black himself is not represented on screen, and the direct look isn't returned by an onscreen audience surrogate. However, we know that these sensuously slow images, in which the logic of time and space no longer holds, emerge out of Black's dream encounter with his childhood friend. As a result, the audience is closely interpolated into the erotic intimacy of these fragments of the fantasy encounter, and when Kevin looks into the lens, we feel Black's desire to be thus seen by this man. Strikingly different from the kinds of reversals or critiques of the male gaze discussed above, in which the woman who looks back generates a kind of discomfort or anxiety about the power of the look, this encounter is rather about the seductiveness of seeing and being seen. The erotics of this exchange

Images from *Carol*.

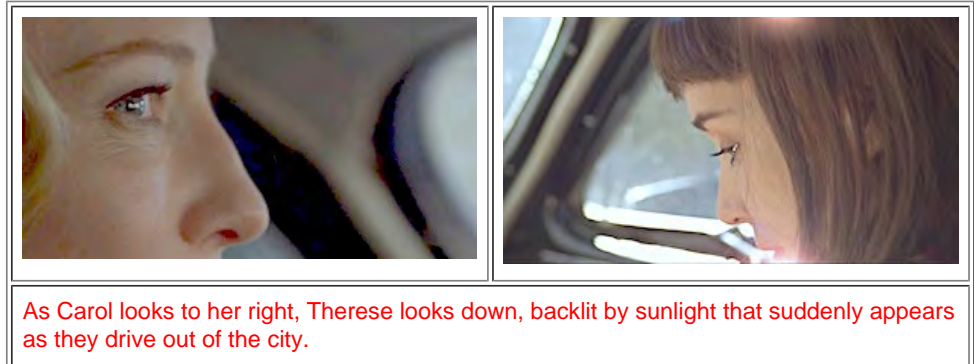


Close-ups of Therese looking produce false eyeline matches that suggest that the closeups within the car are potentially what Therese sees, even though in many cases the angle does not actually produce a true eyeline match across the cut.

extend to the medium itself, as the sequence draws our attention to the texture and surface of the image through the cigarette smoke, the play with focus, and the blurry moving lights in the darkness beyond the restaurant. These visual effects are paired with the score for this scene, “Sweet Dreams” by Nicholas Britell, which builds from a simple percussive rhythm to a haunting blend of string and wind instruments and entirely suppresses any diegetic sound. Here, the direct look and elliptical editing draw us into a moment outside of linear time and logical space, an encounter where the power of looking is not aligned with the one who looks (with the camera) nor with the one who looks (at the camera). Here, looking is no longer about power exchange between the two men, but instead about the liberatory possibility of accessing in dreams the desires and intimacy that are otherwise foreclosed by the intersecting forces of racism, criminalization, and homophobia that constrain the characters’ lives.

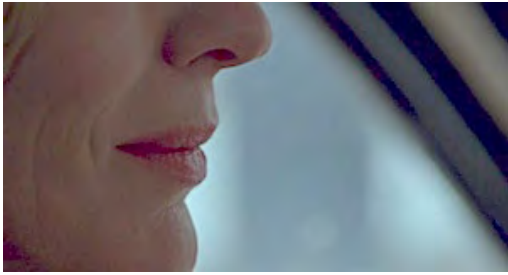
In the dreamlike sequence in *Carol*, the impact of the direct look is deprioritized in favor of attention to the surface and texture of the image, but like *Moonlight*, the elliptical editing, haunting non-diegetic soundscape, slow motion cinematography, and other effects make the surface of the image and the experience of listening a tactile experience. Taking place during a car ride to Carol’s home, this sequence shifts from realistic to oneiric as the piano score bridges a cut from the street to the interior of the car. Inside the car, the camera isolates closeups of the two women and parts of the car—often slightly racking focus due to the tightness of these shots—while their conversation proceeds in a desultory fashion, at a sound level that is noticeably lower than the level of the poignant, non-diegetic score. Many of the closeups of Carol and the car are clearly from Therese’s perspective, as shots of her looking down or turning her head are followed by images of what she would likely see.

There are also moments when Therese looks out the window and the camera turns once again to Carol, highlighting her hands, her lips, and her own look back toward Therese.



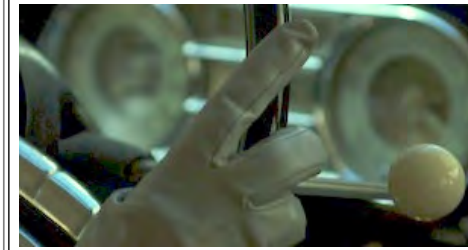
As they drive into a dark tunnel, Carol turns on the radio, and the strains of the 1950s romantic ballad “You Belong to Me” clash with the score, which remains at a higher level than the diegetic music and dialogue.

At this point, the camera pulls back and reveals both women in a two shot, the windows of the car obscured by some kind of mist or condensation. The majority of the image is thrown out of focus, with only Therese’s eyes sharply clear as she turns to look at Carol. From this point onward, the trip through the tunnel becomes a collage of blurred lights and superimpositions, including one dramatic superimposition of Carol’s face over the tunnel lights. Here, a ten-second-long rack focus brings Carol’s face slowly into sharp clarity, revealing at the last possible second that she is looking directly into the lens. As she smiles, a further superimposition returns to the two-shot of both women, and for a moment Carol’s



Entering the tunnel, a dark green tone suffuses the image as the close-ups become tighter ...

and Therese's faces appear to blend together.



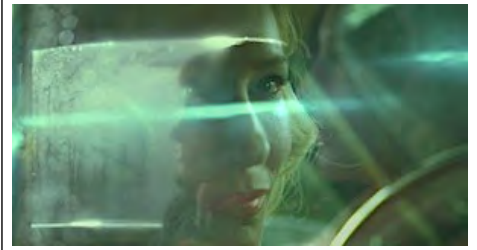
... and the connections between shots more obscure ...



... producing a dream-like effect of being outside of time.



Focus, lighting, and other effects drawn our attention to Therese's look toward Carol.



Lighting, focus, filters, and superimposition produce a fantastical moment where Carol's direct look into the lens is both the clearest part of the image and the most onerous.

In this sequence, fragmentation, play with focus, and superimposition create a sensuous invocation of haptic visuality through which the erotic connection between Carol and Therese becomes something not merely represented, but almost tactile. Attuning us to “the affective, expressive, and musical qualities of vocalized speech more than to its referents,” [60] the audio emphasizes intimacy over information, remaining always attentive to the presence of the characters to each other. Sometimes the agent of the look, and sometimes not, Therese does not simply look at Carol, and our alignment with Therese's position does not invite us to merely look either. Instead, the car ride is an experience in which sight and sound combine to shape the intense intimacy of this shared moment, a moment that—as Carol says when describing Therese—feels “flung out of space.” Flung out of both space and time through the formal techniques that manipulate the image, the audio, and the looks of the characters, these dreamlike sequences from *Moonlight* and *Carol* bring the audience into the erotic, haptic visuality of an experience of both seeing and being seen by the loved one, an experience in which, following Marks, “the figure-ground relationship” dissolves. [61]

Unlike the linearity, directness, and power dynamics of the look or the gaze, to see and be seen emphasizes mutuality, exchange, and vulnerability. While these cases all feature homosexual dyads, it is crucial to emphasize that the effect described here does not emerge from the fact of the queerness of the couples on screen, and certainly not from the sexual orientations and/or gender identities of the creators behind the scenes. To assume as much would be to recreate the essentialist fallacy behind Soloway's claim that a female or feminine emotional essence can be transmitted from producer/director, to cinematographer, to audience. Instead, this effect is produced and can be analyzed formally, through attention to the audio-visual strategies used in these sequences to stage structures of looking. At the same time, the queerness of these stories is not incidental. The potentiality of





The direct look into the lens can convey the powerful potential of seeing and being seen, including its joy and its vulnerability.

these sequences is deeply connected to the way they generate liberatory possibilities amid structural oppression that would foreclose love and intimacy between these queer couples. These sequences show how the direct look into the lens—accompanied by visual effects that make the surface of the screen tactile and by sound design that bridges diegetic and non-diegetic worlds—does indeed produce a kind of revolutionary “feeling seeing,” in which haptic visuality opens up to alternative structures of looking.

These models should not (and even cannot) be reduced to a “female gaze”; instead, they offer a way of looking at and with the loved one that exceeds mere reversal of the phallogentric conventions of the male gaze. Like Halberstam’s proposal for the transgender look—but going beyond Halberstam’s exclusively visually-oriented account of a look bound to violence and trauma—these moments grant us access to alternative times and spaces, providing the grounds for imagining and experiencing new ways of seeing and being seen.

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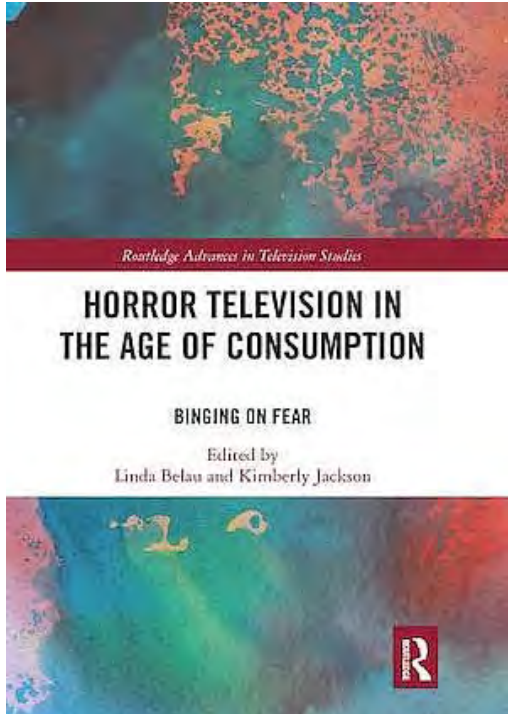
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36. From producing a series of short films by queer and trans creators (see Chris Gardner, "Joey (Jill) Soloway, Lena Waithe Partner With Condé Nast's LGBTQ Platform for Short Film Series 'Queeroes,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 5, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/jill-soloway-lena-waithe-partner-short-film-series-queeroes-1117173>), to a nationwide book tour with their new memoir *She Wants It: Desire, Power and Toppling the Patriarchy* (London: Ebury Press, 2018) that features "talks, thought leaders, and fist-pumping debates" between Soloway and a number of feminist authors, artists, and activists ("Events/Appearances," *SheWantsItBook.com*, accessed November 21, 2018, <https://shewantsitbook.com>) to their production company's diverse investments in publishing, musicals, television, and more, Soloway is a prominent presence in the current media landscape.
37. In "The Female Gaze," Soloway describes Mulvey's theory thus: "Mulvey names three parts of this gaze—the person behind the camera, the characters within the film itself, and the spectator. Wow. Okay doing this deep research for one second on the internet—makes me realize that the Male Gaze emanates out from the center of that triangle. Holy shit it's like an actual triangle with energy SHOOTING OUT FROM THE CENTER OF IT."
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In *Horror Television in the Age of Consumption: Binging on Fear*, editors Linda Belau and Kimberly Jackson aim to provide a space for debate around the horror genre in U.S. television.



Alfred Hitchcock Presents is an anthology series in the 1950s that is regarded as one of the earliest examples of horror on television.

Horror(:) Television

review by [Yaghma Kaby](#)

Belau, Linda, and Kimberly Jackson, editors. *Horror Television in the Age of Consumption: Binging on Fear*. Routledge, 2019. 214 pp., \$39 paperback and eBook.

Horror Television in the Age of Consumption: Binging on Fear is a 2019 anthology edited by Linda Belau and Kimberly Jackson featuring thirteen articles, each of which engages with the question of horror in television from a different critical lens, such as psychoanalysis, gender, and class, to name a few. This recent scholarly endeavor focuses on the increasing number of TV horror series so as to open up debates around the renewal of the horror genre and the plethora of ways to examine it within the context of contemporary television. In addition to textual analyses, the authors and editors of this collection attend to links between cinema and television, question of television style, and historical inquiries pertaining to the horror genre. The collection is organized predominantly chronologically, beginning with 1950s horror series and addressing more contemporary shows in the later chapters, with some overlap in the chronology resulting from each series' release and ending dates. While such an organization has the merit of showcasing the trends that horror television has cycled through, the book has a tendency to prioritize certain critical approaches. In fact, over the years the horror genre has had a rapport with a psychoanalytic approach, and that applies to the essays in this volume, too. In my view, the collection would have achieved greater balance and diversity had it paid equal attention to other critical lenses, notably queer theory.

Horror and television make for a strange mix because television is traditionally associated with domesticity, and horror disrupts that. Television is a “site for and of potential horror” (16) and this is one of the main arguments this volume proposes. Beginning with older horror anthology series, such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1965), the first two chapters (by Peter Hutchings and Mark Jancovich, respectively) set the stage for the collection. As Jancovich's chapter makes clear, episodes that would conform to the horror genre as we know today were sprinkled throughout Hitchcock's anthology, thereby discreetly making their way into mid-century U.S. homes and opening television up to the possibilities of the horror genre. However, the first two chapters leave the readers with the impression that the entire collection will engage with TV horror from a historical or industrial standpoint, yet succeeding authors shift to analyzing television texts and to a lesser degree their social context. Given that Hutchings and Jancovich's chapters introduce us to the anthology form as the precursor to modern TV horror, I would have liked to see another essay trace the progression of the genre and the television industry by discussing, in a later chapter, a contemporary horror anthology series, such as *American Horror Story* (2011-).

Despite it not being the book's primary objective, this collection widens the scope of what is considered horror on television. For example, the editors do not equate horror with gory visuals. Rather, the essays engage with a more diverse aesthetic.



Werewolves in Netflix's *Hemlock Grove* demonstrate the shift in the representation of white masculinity in horror television.



A prequel to Hitchcock's film, *Psycho*, *Bates Motel* offers an alternate family romance through its depiction of the mother-child relationship between Norma and Norman Bates.

The book highlights not only the links between television horror and its precedents in Gothic literature, but also the move away from the Gothic to modernize horror. A chapter by one of the editors, Kimberly Jackson, explores ties between the series *Dexter* (2006-2013) and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, noting that *Dexter*, in its "postmodern surface" and continued seriality—even in the case of murders committed by the titular character—becomes "a twenty-first century version of the [novelistic] myth" (65-66). Paralleling *Dexter* and his sister Debra to the literary classic's characters Catherine and Heathcliff, Jackson resists defining horror mainly in terms of visceral images and allows for investigating the role of gender in defining the genre.

Issues of class and gender are further expounded through a discussion on the figure of the werewolf in U.S. television. According to Lorna Jowett, the werewolf figure stands in opposition to the vampire to connote white masculinity. That said, these figures are malleable, especially in serialized television; they are influenced by social and political changes and may shift in meaning over the years. Through the example of Netflix's *Hemlock Grove* (2013-2015), Jowett argues that the commercial drive towards gaining greater viewership (here, for Netflix) has been influential in redefining the representations associated with werewolves and vampires. Furthermore, TV horror's engagement with socio-political issues and change is not confined to figures of werewolf or vampire. As discussed in James Daems' essay on *Sleepy Hollow* (2013-2017), the series' "pastiche of genres" makes visible the uncertainty and anxieties of the post-9/11 years (135). Taken together, these essays effectively highlight the ways in which TV horror reflects a context of contemporary U.S. society.

Using psychoanalysis as a way to read television texts and also the horror genre itself provides a significant approach that threads its way through several chapters in the book. For example, by looking at the roots of the zombie as a "non-European construction" (90), Alexander N. Howe uses Lacanian theory to dissect *The Walking Dead* (2010–) and the ways in which it depicts bodies—both human and zombie. Touching on seriality, the author also examines the challenges of sustaining a horror series over multiple episodes and seasons. Howe argues that the length of this particular series results in zombies being divested of their horror status. Lacan is also foundational to Linda Belau's chapter on *Bates Motel* (2013-2017) and the "Maternal Thing." In addition, through Lacanian theory, Ed Cameron's essay considers *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) as a series whose surrealist images have been vastly influential on contemporary television horror. These chapters are located at different points in the collection which indicates book's theoretical penchant for critical engagement rooted in psychoanalysis. However, given the diversity of TV horror, more space should have been allocated to other critical approaches.

Another prominent discussion strand in this book, and one of its strengths, is comparing horror in cinema and television. Television studies are often secondary in importance for media scholars; this volume aims to rectify that, especially for studies of the horror genre. Of the horror series analyzed here, a few such as *Bates Motel* and *Hannibal* (2013-2015) have prior cinematic iterations. The corresponding chapters touch on that connection. Yet the critics here who take up these film/TV comparisons demonstrate that horror in television stands on its own. I found it refreshing to see these shows given due attention beyond their link to cinematic predecessors. To give one example, as Stacey Abbott argues, *Hannibal* pushes boundaries, especially when considering the place of gore in horror and specifically on television. Abbott links the characters' point of view to the "gothic horror traditions" (129) that are used in the series' mise-en-scène and excessively pretentious aesthetics, thereby making a case that this is "prestige horror" on television (123).



The visual opulence of NBC's series, *Hannibal*, expands the definition of the horror genre beyond visceral images.



Netflix's *Stranger Things* expresses contemporary social anxieties in its story and a desire to return to the past in its 1980s aesthetics.

The focus on lavish aesthetics as a feature of television horror is also taken up in Michael Fuchs' essay about Showtime's *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). Fuchs insightfully investigates the show's return to Victorian Gothic tales and the temporal tension that exists in bringing the Victorian period into the present moment. Such a backward glance also figures as "nostalgia horror" in Rose Butler's chapter on *Stranger Things* (2016–), where contemporary social and political anxieties get expressed through the world of the Upside Down and the series' 1980s aesthetics.

Any book discussing horror would be incomplete without including a queer perspective. This book investigates the queer family as depicted within *Scream: The TV Series* (2015–). Here, Kyle Christensen brings together discussions on the link between cinematic predecessors and the depiction of a mother-child family unit similar to *Bates Motel*. However, as Christensen makes clear, *Scream* does not follow through with its promise of queer representation and ends up queerbaiting its audience. While I am glad to see the book includes a chapter with a queer critical lens, I still see a need for greater range of queer scholarship, especially when compared with the multiple chapters offering a psychoanalytical reading. In fact, a number of series under direct discussion in the book, such as *Bates Motel* and *Penny Dreadful*, overtly have the potential to be examined through a queer critical lens.

This book successfully brings together scholars at different stages of their academic career, from established to emerging scholars, and it incorporates diverse approaches, so that the resulting volume provides an overview of ways of engaging with TV horror. Historical and textual analysis of television horror series form the bulk of the critical discussions, which can be the building block for future research into more recent horror series, such as Netflix's *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) or FX's horror anthology, *American Horror Story* (2011–), as well as research into television production, audience and fan reception and engagement.

The present volume engages with many questions central to the study of horror television: the definition and outer limits of the genre, the legitimacy status of television compared to film, and the placement of horror within a socio-political context. Due attention is given to both popular and cult horror television series and the ways in which each of those series push the boundaries the genre. Furthermore, the references to binge-watching and fandom practices are apt and the inclusion of some widely popular series allows for future studies to continue the discussion of fandom.

The chapters are organized in such a way as to address both the question of history as well as textual analysis of selected television horror series and figures in the horror genre. The current chronological organization—beginning with 1950s and 1960s horror anthology series and then moving on to more contemporary examples and debates—seems adequate. However, TV horror provides ample space for a wide variety of approaches, including but not limited to queer theory, and I would have liked to see the range of approaches more rounded. Having said that, this edited collection is a valuable resource for its audience, among whom are emerging researchers in the field of TV Studies and other readers interested in learning more about the television series they have watched.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Promotional photo for season 1 of *Veronica Mars*, setting up the “gritty” noir style of the 2000s teen drama and the unconventional pink-clad schoolgirl detective.



Promotional poster for the Kickstarter-funded film *Veronica Mars*, using the motif of Veronica with a large camera to denote her PI status.

“Maybe you should handle dinner.” Food-based domesticity in *Veronica Mars*’ regendered neo-noir trauma narrative

by [Teresa Caprioglio](#)

The story of the production of teen mystery noir drama *Veronica Mars* (showrunner: Rob Thomas) boasts nearly as many twists and turns as its own narratives. The show aired its first two seasons on UPN and its third on the CW, UPN’s successor, between 2004 and 2007, to middling ratings, if critical success. However, the series has enjoyed a particular cult appeal in the years since 2007 that has brought it back not once, but twice, in varying fan-supported institutional contexts. After a fan-funded Kickstarter film distributed by Warner Brothers (the same parent company as its prior networks) in 2014, the series returned in 2019 for an eight-episode, one-case miniseries on Hulu.

The drama centers around titular character Veronica Mars (Kristen Bell), a cis female private investigator who learned her trade from her divorced father, and her investigations in her income- and racially stratified, fictional hometown of Neptune in southern California. Given noir’s typical investment in hardnosed male-identified detective protagonists, *Veronica Mars* does a great deal of work to regender traditional noir tropes through two main characters—Veronica and her primary love interest throughout the series, Logan Echolls (Jason Dohring).

The idea of restructuring gender within an already-established genre framework is perhaps more developed in fan-work than in source texts themselves.[1] Fan creators and scholars have even developed an evolving vocabulary to describe this pursuit.[2] Here, I make use of the concept of regendering—i.e., reworking the genders of characters within a gender-deterministic story framework, presumably in order to comment upon the gendering in that original framework—to explore the recasting of *Veronica Mars*’ fairly traditional neo-noir structure. Traditional noir structure, particularly in its use of femmes fatales and gender in romantic frameworks, reproduces Laura Mulvey’s male gaze and the corresponding narrative anxieties surrounding femininity and its engagement with cis masculinity. Visuality and narrative thus make regendering in noir complex and fraught with traditional gendered expectations to a rather extreme degree while potentially opening space for queer approaches to identity and content.

Whether a series’ use of a female lead interacts with expectations of domesticity, given noir’s devotion to the solitary detective who lives apart from society, usually depends on an instability introduced by the femme fatale. However, while Veronica is permitted to be the hardboiled lady detective within *Veronica Mars*’ narrative and lay claim to her non-nurturant, nonnormative role, Logan has a harder time navigating expectations of an homme fatal. Hardboiled detectives of



Promotional image for season 4 of *Veronica Mars* on Hulu, showing Veronica alone and without her camera but with the shadow of "Mars Investigations" behind her.



Veronica holds a smoking burrito in the office during a discussion about food and health with her father.



Logan struggles with narrative expectations of the homme fatal while pursuing recovery.



the Raymond Chandler mold are tough in the face of tragedy and determinedly solitary, while femmes fatales seek to upend male typeage using manipulations and sexuality. Such narrative tropes jostle uncertainly in this series against the expectations for cis-heteronormative romantic and narrative closure set up by its marketing as a teen TV drama. In an intriguing way, an omnipresence of food, mealtime spaces, and kitchens as well as dinner parties in season four of *Veronica Mars* works to localize domesticity and expectations about it for its feminine-gendered detective through the figure of her homme fatal.

Kitchens and mealtimes in season four of *Veronica Mars* expose instabilities in the series' re-gendered neo-noir framework, particularly in the interplay between Veronica's hardboiled persona and her vacillating, trauma-recovering love interest/boyfriend Logan. Logan served in earlier seasons as her homme fatal in a more traditionally destabilizing way, but in season 4 he attends therapy and seeks a more conventional family life. However, this I contend does not impede his homme-fatal ability to disrupt Veronica's narrative, but rather enhances it in a way that destabilizes his own position as well as the narrative's relation to trauma recovery. Producers make consistent efforts (centered by scripting and visual presentation of Logan's character) using food, kitchens, and dinners to re-inscribe Veronica into cis-heteronormative relationship and family structures as well as traditional trauma recovery modalities. Ironically, instead the show drives the narrative to problematizing trauma recovery and therapy, so that eventually Logan has to leave the series entirely in order to maintain Veronica's solitary, jaded, 'noir' detective status.

Scriptwise, these differing components of the neo-noir narrative, gender, social cues around food, and expectations of trauma structure the fourth season of *Veronica Mars* in dramatic and nuanced ways. For example, food emerges as a mode of checking domestic gender performance that is rejected or reframed by our titular anti-heroine. In addition, trauma recovery becomes another destabilizing and threatening factor to Veronica's work and her persona as a damaged-but-strong detective. Both domesticity and recovery get localized in the homme fatal that Logan represents; later these are removed from the equation via another traumatic experience to maintain the "interesting [...] sexy" noir mode that showrunner Rob Thomas expects.[3] In his postmortem on the season, Thomas discusses Veronica's position in season four, especially relative to Logan, his interest in marriage, and his approach to recovery. Thomas says he wanted to present her as a thirty-something woman who has to grow up and choose the direction of her life, something he saw as a traditionally male pursuit.

I present here a detailed analysis of season four's eight episodes with particular focus on the structuring of gender and recovery through the characters' encounters with food. What in fact emerges in the show's narrative and style is a rejection of the norms of family and marital life as well as the expectations of recovery. The producers sought to retain a particular image of the lonely, damaged detective that, despite Thomas's efforts to sidestep normative gendering, also has unsettlingly traditional, punitive consequences for our view of Veronica Mars.

Queer television and regendering genre

Queerness in mass culture can be discussed at a meta-level as either connotative or denotative, drawing from Alexander Doty.[4] Either a text is queered via historically specific cultural readings and interpretations, often by queer consumers (connotative), or a text represents queerness in and of itself, if queer people are the subject of the text (denotative). Many film and television texts have tended toward the connotative mode because of social strictures and norms, and

Veronica and Logan tidy after breakfast, but narrowly avoid collision in the kitchen; they are often out-of-sync in this particular domestic space.



Veronica and Logan share a kiss at their season 4 finale wedding, in a quickly overturned moment of traditional Hollywood cisheteronormative closure.



Veronica and Logan come together pre-proposal, barely lit and cast in the shadows typical of the series.



Veronica and Logan marry in the bright Neptune sunlight, a short-lived repudiation of the series' noir style.

often legal restrictions; the result has been the prevalence of a descriptive, implicit, and highly coded 'language' of winks, symbols, and implication.[5] Queer consumers, seeking representation of their lived experience, unpick the purported dominant reading to reveal negotiated or oppositional plots, characterizations, or implied backstories, and these may or may not have been within the intended narrative put forth by media industry professionals.[6]

Within dominant representational modes, the console—TV—serves as a form of closeting whose discourses shape the available narratives for queer characters, much in the way the concept of the closet restricts and produces knowledges and practices surrounding queerness.[7] Television can be a connotative space to explore queerness, whereas the inclusion of a token lesbian or gay character in a TV series functions as a denotative localization of homosexuality and makes it available for subjection to a more programmatic construction.[8] Changing the genre-accepted genders of characters can—and in the case of *Veronica Mars*' season 4, does—serve the connotative purpose of subsuming potentially queer content into cis-heteronormative gender and sexuality structures, diminishing the content's representative threat to existing power structures. When it is only connotative, queerness in texts can be relegated to the implied and thus deniable or avoidable, rather than overtly denotative and thus subject to reactionary queerphobic response, whether legal or social.

So what exactly is at stake in regendering narratives? Most work in this area has been located in fan studies, where regendering is a key feature of creative fanwork. Lucy Baker identifies regendering within this framework as a form of feminist praxis that seeks to disrupt gendering in conservative media industries, though also it also has a needee function within mainstream media's liberal model of gender representation.[9] Moreover, much regendering reiterates the extant gender binary, as evidenced by popular terms for the fanwork genre like "genderswap" and Rule 63, an Internet rule predicated on the idea that there exists a counterpart of the "opposite gender" for each existing character. Moves toward terms like "genderbend" and "genderfuck" make a clearer effort to disrupt this binary, but as Alexis Lothian notes, much of the function of this regendering is to heterosexualize what would otherwise be queer romantic narratives, due to the predominance of developed masculine main characters.[10]

Television producers face a pressure to heterosexualize narratives by reframing existing genre tropes with feminine protagonists. Of course, such a demand arises from a media landscape that underrepresents women, but it also works against efforts to address underrepresentation of queer individuals in similar cultural products. This is further evidenced by the tendency in such regendered work to shift the kind of behavior assigned as well as social positioning for regendered characters. In *Veronica Mars*, homme fatal Logan first exhibits violent hyper-masculinity, particularly in the first three seasons wherein he hosts fights, is arrested for murder, and generally serves as the narrative's "bad boy." However, season 4 reimagines his social positioning, playing it against Veronica's in a way that allows the script to disrupt traditional gender expectations and provide potential for the re-evaluation, destabilizing, and reworking of gender.[11]

In fanwork, whether a reworking occurs or whether systemic gender expectations are instantly brought to bear upon regendered characters' behavior in largely depends on individual fan creators' own motivations and social preconceptions. In general, fanwork allows for much more variation (and thus, slippage in the role of the trope itself) than do traditional media modes. However, some exploration of variation still can be found in industrial versions of regendering like *Veronica Mars*.

Veronica Mars'regendered (neo?-)noir



Veronica ends the series alone in the city, hardboiled lady detective *par excellence*.



Veronica does detective work throughout season 4, most of it solo.



In a familiar image from early seasons, Veronica is often perched on her father's desk during client meetings, though this becomes less common as season 4 continues.



Over the course of season 4, Veronica claims

While the generic designation of noir refers primarily to an aesthetic structure—dark, dramatic lighting, gritty and severe mise-en-scène, and a focus on the silhouetted, shadowy figures of a storyline—it also draws a character picture that informs the structure of cast and narrative. Film noir has a particular mood, violent and eroticized, built through its titular low lighting and fractured, multidirectional storylines. These are told through unreliable narrators in noir's damaged anti-heroes and morally corrupt supporting casts.[12] Neo-noir is generally seen to incorporate the structures of traditional noir, often hybridized with other genres, and with more use of color than traditional noir.[13]

Noir masculinity is typically located in the central investigating protagonist and centers “around toughness, honor, incorruptibility and slick, street-smart charm.”[14] Historically, noir is ambivalent about traditional expectations of masculinity, rather “veering away from a masculinity emphasizing control, strength, heterosexual pursuit, and self-mastery and instead finds [the noir protagonist] dissembling, hysterical, fragmented.”[25] The protagonist, however, generally remains focused within this fragmentation on his investigation and on reasserting control. Typically, his masculinity is based on the idea that control, strength, and importantly heterosexuality have been the province of the typically cisgender male protagonist before the case and/or his encounter with the femme fatale. Much of noir sees the protagonist working to retain or regain that masculinity, often by solving a mystery.

Veronica emerged in season one as the jaded narrating investigator, hardboiled as nails because of the murder of her best friend and her own experience of date rape at a high school party. Andrea Braithwaite notes that Veronica is, more than another iteration of the rise of the female detective, a “chick dick” in her dual characterization as teen drama lead and noir private investigator.[16] As noir investigator, she is committed to finding the truth at all costs, in service of a moral agenda that is entirely her own. Mobilizing the “chick” aspect of her character is also key. As Alaine Martaus notes, Veronica is accomplished at leveraging her perceived gender, alongside age and inexperience, in many performative iterations to achieve her end goal—typically the solving of a mystery.[17] Her general characterization has stayed constant throughout the series, including the film, largely through narration and through her interaction with other characters, especially those who emerge as foils. Veronica's regendering of the masculine detective is accomplished by her hardnosed persona as well as her father Keith Mars' (Enrico Colantoni) own role as past sheriff and current private investigator. The “wrong body” aspect of Veronica's teenaged “chick dick” incursion into investigation[18] becomes less pronounced in season 4, however, as she has aged and gained institutional qualifications for her work.

Veronica's position as a private eye was tenuous and implied in the first three seasons of the series, but it becomes institutionalized by her age and law degree in season four, alongside her many years of experience. Again, experience often characterizes the backstory of traditional noir detectives, even as they personally descend into fragmentation. Young, fatherless foil Mattie Ross (Izabela Vidovic) does considerable work in season 4 to showcase the liminal, deemed-inappropriate roots of Veronica's detective persona. She takes on Veronica's original series role—a plucky, traumatized teenager left largely to her own devices who is sarcastically and inexorably sticking her nose where it doesn't belong. Veronica first rejects Mattie and then takes some apparent responsibility for training her and providing her with protection via her emblematic taser. The narrative never calls upon Veronica to nurture Mattie, however, and in allowing her to provide distanced mentoring and guidance perhaps provides viewers with some hints of the less-normative regendering that Baker seeks in fanfiction.[19]

solo space in what is nominally her father's office, beyond the reception desk she occupies in seasons 1-3.

The writers regularly incorporate jokes that Veronica, in joining the family business, has emasculated her father, who does take a backseat to much of the investigation. Narrative developments imply here that her move to formally embody the position of PI is contingent upon regendering at the expense of another and through her efforts to exert solitary control. Gendered access to the role of detective thus emerges as a zero-sum game, which is further emphasized by Veronica's interaction with her homme fatal. Within noir plots generally, the detective's efforts to restore control and masculinity are typically rather successful, if seen at the end with a bit of introspection about a difficulty returning to 'normal', especially in hardboiled fiction that is often serialized by following a detective (e.g., the Philip Marlowes and Sam Spades of the genre). Returning to normal often rests on the narrative abjection of noir's femme fatale, often the root of the protagonist's psychic fragmentation.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Homme fatal Logan emerges from the surf scantily clad, being remarked upon by two bit characters and Veronica.



Veronica and Logan depart the beach together, Veronica shrouded in black leather while Logan sports a blue speedo.



Logan's pilot episode introduction includes the threatening destruction of Veronica's headlights.

The femme fatale introduces instability to the noir narrative in a localized fashion. Instead of the typically cisgender “sexpot” female character, *Veronica Mars* casts male lead Logan Echolls as its homme fatal. Logan’s season four introduction, for example, is a lingering Bond-girl-esque shot of him emerging from the surf in a small pair of blue swim trunks, followed by a conversation made of sexual jokes and innuendo with Veronica and two other women. Such a move appears as an attempt to flip the objectification script typical of classical noir by reiterating it across perceived gender lines.

Traditionally, the femme fatale represents such a threat within the narrative that she is “as fatal to herself as she is to those who become entangled in her schemes.”[20] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Namely, the function of a femme fatale is to bring our hero close to death, and in so doing to die herself. This trope can be attributed to heteropatriarchal anxieties about women, and it forms perhaps a major portion of the undergirding for Mulvey’s cinematic castration anxiety leading to the punishment-or-fetishization zero-sum game of femininity in film.[21] The femme fatale of film noir is generally not successful domestically in the typical frame of cis-heteronormative society, but rather is usually scripted as a threat to the family or at least to the normative heterosexual union.[22]

As the homme fatal of *Veronica Mars*, Logan plays the role of a destabilizing narrative influence in a way that dances along the perceived masculine-feminine binary. As a naval intelligence officer, he represents a paternalist institution linked to cis male violence but also to the slipperiness and suspicion of a spy—a rather typical role for femmes fatales. However, in a departure from traditional modes of femme-fatale disruption, Logan is also positioned as the character that continually calls for a more conventionally domestic, nuclear family relationship. He is the one to propose, to Veronica’s frustration and discomfort, and he is also the one to drop very heavy hints about having children. Logan appears also as the primary cook and frequently is seen in the kitchen throughout season 4; it’s a marked shift from his seasons 1-3 role as the ‘bad boy’ involved in street fights, car chases, and cafeteria dust-ups. Logan’s attempts to inscribe Veronica into institutionally gendered power relations and his apparent accompanying desire to participate in the trappings of domesticity are directly associated with femininity. Thus Logan’s relation to conventional domestic space and roles introduces a new, queered form of instability as a threat to Veronica’s calling as a (solitary noir) detective.

Logan’s attempt to propose marriage in the first episode of season four (coming after a fraught history of breakups, makeups, and failed communication) is summarily rejected by Veronica until the season finale. The script ties her hesitance to her attempts to cling to the role of detective and thus it sets up the romance-based B plot as an impediment to the miniseries’ A plot mystery. For example, at one point Veronica leaves the site of Logan’s proposal, their shared apartment, to attend a town meeting as a business-owning private eye.

The added rottenness of the femme fatale is often foregrounded by the role of voice-over narration in the noir genre,[23] one that *Veronica Mars* incorporates stylistically. This holdover from film noir’s corollary radio form and from some first-person examples of the literary genre focalizes the narrative through the investigatory figure of the protagonist. This spoken narration colors not only our experience of the narrative’s central mystery or problem, but also our



Logan's violent and socially disruptive tendencies are expanded as he hosts fights between unhousted Neptune residents in season 1's sixth episode.



Season 2's premiere begins with Logan's arrest for murder, while he insists to Veronica that he "didn't stab him."



Among the last shots of season 3, Logan, bloody-faced, laughs at the man he has just punched lying on the Hearst College cafeteria floor saying, "You're going to die," and agrees, "Someday."

understanding of each character. While dramatic television (and film, to a certain degree) complicate this via the addition of the camera's gaze and scenes that center characters other than the protagonist (sometimes while excluding the protagonist), the protagonist's voice as interpretive nonetheless dominates the narrative. Thus, the instability of the narrative and of the protagonist's performance of self within it, while spoken through internal monologue, often externalizes the factors contributing to that performance. In this way as Veronica's narration works to emphasize her rejection of Logan's push toward domesticity up until she dreams about infidelity with her ex, Leo. Braithwaite notes of season 1-3 that Veronica's narration often "draw[s] attention to political and social corruption and their impact on individuals' lives"[24] It's a narration that, once again, emphasizes a different kind of threat that Logan poses to Veronica's noir detective role.

Logan's work to bring Veronica more fully into the home is echoed by his insistence upon self-reflective talking. Veronica's focus on her work and their interactions connect his desire for communication to his participation in therapy, presumably related to his past experiences of abuse and implied armed forces trauma as well as his personal violent tendencies. The role of trauma recovery, here, is written to more fully inscribe Logan into conventional, resilience-based modes of social development and to feminine-coded expectations of open communication. He offers and models these modes of interaction to Veronica only for her to continually reject them. This rejection helps her to maintain her hardboiled, 'damaged' persona in keeping with noir tropes, but it also problematizes and complicates Logan's own recovery work.

In discussing *Veronica Mars*, showrunner Rob Thomas has pointed to the domestic instability and heterosexual intrigue of noir as a necessary feature of the series' fourth season. The fourth season finale ends with Logan's murder (Veronica's by-then husband). When Thomas was queried at length about this script decision, his response rested on *Veronica Mars'* generic classification—Veronica as a detective, solving cases "out in the world" is "less interesting, less sexy, less noir" if she has a husband.[25] His response also implicates a certain expectation for 'sexiness' attached to not only drama television, but women in screen media generally, bringing us back to Laura Mulvey. But particularly in the context of noir, using sexy female characters also means including trauma and violent punishment (what Thomas terms "damage" in his response[26]) for women who present a direct or existential threat to perceived modes of masculinity.[27] However, Thomas' proclamation is of interest because of his high-about-face from housing traditional anxieties in the femme fatale, where it is her disruption of patriarchal systems that poses the predominating threat. The shift in the role of gender and sexuality may point to the queering consequences of regendering in noir specifically.

Within the structure of traditional media like dramatic television, regendering may work in different ways. Much as neo-noir reutilizes traditional aesthetics and conventions in a hybridized genre, Lindop contends that postfeminism and its push toward traditional gender roles are expressed in this kind of construction of the female investigator and the homme fatal, who may disrupt the traditional gendering of noir characters but generally serve only to expand on anxieties and societal pressures that they express across gendered lines.[28] *Veronica Mars'* construction of a female investigator/homme fatal duo that reproduce concerns about domesticity, heterosexual relationships, and family seems to echo this tendency of neo-noir to flip the script a little, but the character development then retains many of the social anxieties and pressures that animate original, traditional noir formats. It thus follows that the moments of genderqueer possibility in the narrative—before domesticity checks reinscribe systemic norms



Post-reunion, Veronica and Logan playfully grab snacks in the half-lit kitchen, preparing the first ad hoc meal of the series and perhaps the only food-based encounter they have without incident.



Veronica, alone on the couch, consumes this first meal while prodding into Logan's intelligence work, a harbinger of the investigative impulse that will complicate their relationship.



Veronica and Keith eat fast food in the office, a common occurrence traced from early seasons that prioritizes work over food.

—may offer a space within these industry-permitted regendered narratives for finding, again, queer television in a space that might outwardly reject that moniker.

Kitchens, dinner tables, and dinner parties: domestic checks

While Angel Daniel Matos has discussed the kitchen as a queer space and a space of defining and exploring queer domesticity within the context of the drama series *Queer as Folk*,^[29] the kitchen, dinner table, and dinner party are more often seen as the space of traditional concepts of gender, family, and social circles. In Matos's estimation, the kitchen may become a space for the negotiation of relationships and sexual identity within and against traditional hetero- and homonormative expectations built on Western, white, heteropatriarchal constructions of domestic space. The negotiations that *Queer As Folk* and other series have embodied inform a genderqueered space of possibility that the kitchen and other food-spaces become in the season four episodes of *Veronica Mars*—though they never quite leak liminality as a facet of (queer) noir outside the domestic space.

To give an example, immediately after their episode one beach reunion, Veronica and Logan appear in the kitchen, preparing an ad-hoc meal of snack foods playfully. This scene, meant to display their functionality as a couple, sets up not only the immediately following failed proposal but also future encounters in the Mars-Echolls apartment kitchen. Colored, as it is, by earlier seasons' use of food (the Mars family's typical ad-hoc meals, Logan's domineering father's attempts at inscribing more traditional family dinner/family cooking behaviors), this mini-meal serves as an odd in-between of both these traditions and their replication in other encounters throughout season four. It is also presented as one of few happy, unguarded moments in the miniseries.

The script and style of the show still rely heavily on cis-heteronormative concepts and restrictions of kitchen, hearth, and home. The modes of domesticity as queered that Matos gestures to seem to rest on particular expectations of masculinity that are located (or not located, as the case may be) in the home—namely, that domesticated masculinity is an alternate form of masculinity that frames more traditional hegemonic masculinity within contexts usually reserved for femininity.^[30] The household kitchen itself has long been socially structured as a place of learning, living, and potentially exerting power, though it often also imposes domestication in the sense of controlled existence, for cis (white, upper/middle-class) women, and that domestication regularly continues in more modern forms of food and kitchen related discourse.^[31] While *Veronica Mars* does not quite arrive at Mary Douglas Vavrus's 'Mr. Mom', Logan's participation in the kitchen comes tied with certain familial expectations, as I hope to demonstrate further.

The dinner table serves as a central point for the traditional nuclear family—however, this is not necessarily a binding, static concept. As Richard Wilk notes, the family dinner table is often the site of power struggles and the negotiation of power dynamics among family members.^[32] The idea of the family meal also emerges as a class- and assimilation-based ideological tool, which centralizes the



Veronica's prepared salad is interrupted by a break in the case, drawing her further from the threshold of the kitchen and into work.



Veronica and Keith argue about the case and Keith's health over food in the office near the end of the miniseries, cementing this space as one of working ad hoc meals.

nuclear family as the unit of society but also presumes a temporal structure that privileges middle and upper class families.[33] This presumptive time structure changes with the introduction of television, but not altogether in its ideological function. Indeed, it keeps its ideological function on television, and also in research about its effects on children's socialization,[34] and this further reinforces its role in reproducing concepts of the family, of gender, and of class within society.

Veronica's self-displacement from the kitchen may have its roots in her own experiences via private eye work with domesticity that also make her resistant to typical family structures, experiences that continue into season four. The series' first appearance of a kitchen is in its first scene, where Veronica gives a final report and demonstration for her divorcee client, depicts kitchens both in the ex-wife's and ex-husband's homes as the spaces of failed domesticity. Both parties experience a kitchen as a space of surveillance and retribution, particularly tied to the dissolution of their marriage. This discord is echoed by the later appearance of Mattie's mother's home, where Veronica sees Mattie's mother and her stepsiblings demonstrate a fraught relationship and disharmony, one that the plot further complicates by Mattie's visual exclusion and narrative self-isolation.

Veronica's resistance to traditional cisnormative domesticity is further emphasized by her own relationship to cooking—namely, that she doesn't really do it outside of her encounters with Logan or as a means to an end. When a scene does open with her cooking as Logan returns home, it's only as a way to frame her need for his help gathering information. In another example, Patton Oswalt's pizza delivery man Penn Epner appears with a pizza Veronica has ordered to have the chance to ask Penn a few questions. The other time Veronica directly references cooking, she is on the phone to Logan, asking if he plans to “really cook... or open.. cans of soup,” adding, “maybe you should handle dinner,” placing the onus of kitchen domesticity on Logan directly.

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| <p>Veronica cooks solo as a self-confessed bribe for Logan's assistance with the case she is working.</p> | <p>The two appear in the kitchen together, but not collaboratively, as Veronica details the favor she seeks.</p> |
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Veronica's cooking is interrupted by the delivery order she placed for more information.



Delivery driver Penn Epner further embeds the case into this scene and brings work into the domestic space of Veronica and Logan's home.



Dinner forgotten, Veronica leans on the ordered pizza as the focus of the scene shifts entirely and the action moves out of the kitchen.



Logan joins Veronica outside the kitchen and further abandons Veronica's prepared dinner.

The Mars family (Keith and Veronica) continues their seasons 1-3 tradition of takeout and microwave meals in the office, with one failed microwave burrito serving to reveal Keith's health concerns and threat to their family unit. However, Logan continues to push toward more conventional meals. In an episode two scene where Veronica returns home to find Logan in the kitchen, he has used "every pan [they] own" to make paella, which he apparently intends them to eat together. However, it is in this moment that Veronica makes her first whole-hearted attack on his personal efforts in therapy, demanding a return of the mercurial, often violent (though generally not toward Veronica) Logan of earlier seasons. Their resulting fight goads Logan into a frenzy that sees him punch a hole in a cupboard door and join Veronica in an angry, semi-violent sexual encounter. This encounter pleases Veronica greatly, but all Logan can say in the morning is "at least it was good for you," establishing quite firmly their differing perspectives on his recovery and the potential lack of Logan's consent in their sexual encounter. This whole development comes scripted through the failed food event and taken all together is a comment on their domesticity.







Logan makes labor-intensive paella in the kitchen, a precursor to a push to talk about feelings.



Veronica's continued pushes toward Logan's earlier-seasons' confrontational behavior forestalls Logan's excitement—his shoulders draw inward here



Framed by the door and outside the kitchen, Veronica feels put on the spot by Logan's non-reaction to her refusal of his proposal

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| Frustrated by Veronica's refusal and her pushes to be more like seasons 1-3's "bad boy," Logan punches a hole in a cabinet door | Logan's violent response ignites passion in Veronica, who surges into a kiss that becomes a sexual encounter |
|  |  |
| In the morning after, Logan's body language is closed off, his face impassive, as Veronica jokes and smiles. | Finally, Logan summons a half-hearted smile and pats his buttoned henley, implying some form of coercion or regret as he says, "At least it was good for you." |



Veronica and Leo eat takeout at a precinct desk, as Leo joins the law-enforcement-adjacent ad hoc meal tradition.

Veronica's ex, Leo D'Amato (Max Greenfield) appears as a secondary love interest partway through the miniseries; he conforms more than Logan does to the Mars baseline of ad hoc eating in not-quite domestic spaces. He arrives first carrying a pizza into Veronica's shared apartment with Logan (for an awkward encounter first with Logan and then with the couple). Later he and Veronica share a Chinese takeout lunch at the police station where Leo, an FBI agent, is temporarily stationed, followed by continuing examples of this ad hoc meal practice. He interrupts the domestic paradigm, bringing new life to the established narrative patterns of narrative and character tropes that producers use to depict the relationship between Veronica and Logan as one of a negotiation around trauma and a gendering of people and spaces. He also more directly echoes the differing relation to food and worldview enacted by Veronica and Keith throughout the show's run. These moments underscore the producers' insistence on Veronica's need to exist as a lone wolf. But they also provide more evidence to view food-space as a place for the queering of domestic norms and thus television narratives. For example, consider the visual styling and prop choices in Veronica's own outreach to Leo as they negotiate their mutual attraction while working together. She brings him a lone cinnamon roll to consume at his desk, cementing her commitment to the ad hoc, queered meal paradigm in which she has been raised even as she rejects him as a romantic partner.

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In a second example, Veronica and Leo eat sandwiches at the same precinct desk, a non-domestic space where work and eating occur simultaneously and separate from domestic life..



Leaning into the noir setting and lighting, Veronica and Leo continue their ad-hoc eating with stakeout snacks.



In Veronica and Leo's final work-and-eat encounter, Veronica brings a cinnamon roll but doesn't stay, adding distance as she comes closer to getting married.

Food and food-space's role in domestic expectations is only amplified when focused on adult behavior in the ritual of a dinner party. Culturally, this is an event which Jacqueline Botterill traces from its upper-class Victorian iterations through to a more modern concept of a dinner party's associated performances of self. While Botterill's interview-based study focuses on contemporary Canadian dinner parties, the idea of food bringing everyone together continues, and its sense of traditional, or correct space configurations and display provide insight into the role of the dinner party as a normative performance. [35] As a social tool, the dinner party plays a clearly assimilationist, social-circle-circumscribing role that restricts the extent to which one's authentic self may be acceptably performed. However, the very fact of such a performance occurring provides the tools for its negotiation.

Perhaps the most direct use of the dinner party as critique come at Veronica's longtime best friend Wallace Fennel's (Percy Daggs III) house. Given the intensely race- and class-aware politics of *Veronica Mars'* scriptwriting, this episode suggest that those who aspirationally seek to challenge the stratified Neptune system also seek to reproduce it. Wallace, his wife, and their young child represent the heteronormative, aspirational path that Veronica has routinely and summarily rejected, as well as the bourgeois existence she pushes against in the intensely income-stratified Neptune landscape, despite the precarity that Wallace (now, also, his wife and child)'s blackness has caused. Both scenes that take place at Wallace's house construct his particular domestic space as one of a startlingly typical bourgeois nuclear family, first through his own family and then through the families and couples that attend his cocktail party.

At the family dinner party/double date where Logan and Veronica dine with Wallace and his wife, Logan begins by playing with Wallace's infant child, Noah, and playfully needling Veronica about what a baby is. This focus on the nuclear family and reproduction follows with Wallace's wife's describing her conversations with her mother-in-law about the diet she feeds young Noah, further inscribing food into her logic and control of the family. Veronica feels the need to escape after this kind of conversation and a suggestion that she and Logan should marry (coming from Wallace). Her flight visually echoes her disappearance from her own apartment following Logan's failed proposal.

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Logan, Wallace, and infant Noah appear together in a shot. Veronica never appears in the same frame as the whole Fennell family during this first dinner party, nor does she make direct contact with Wallace's child



The dinner party creates a space of family, domesticity, and friendship, though Veronica does not take direct part; note that she is the only one whose face is not visible in this shot. (dinner party).



Veronica and Logan's dinner party reactions come in almost direct mirrors of each other, not synergistic despite their shared frames.



Here, Logan seems less enthused while Veronica's enthusiasm takes a performative edge; they are still framed by the cheerful Fennells.



The close of the dinner party leaves Veronica alone in the frame, uncomfortable and silent.

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Veronica appears juxtaposed with the nuclear Fennells, entering the housewarming party alone and alienated.



A revolving series of aggressively “yuppie” conversations includes the near-force-feeding of hummus shown here; bourgeois performativity is necessary to this space.



Nicole redirects a conversation about exclusive preschools, and she and Veronica become performatively domestic and bourgeois, with a potentially romantic (though soon forestalled) undertone.

Intriguingly, the pressure Veronica feels at Wallace’s home and in response to his normative position do not necessitate Logan’s presence in the scene. Another example, in episode five, occurs at a cocktail party at Wallace’s house for Noah’s birthday. The event reiterates a particularly bourgeois construction of domestic space and traditional nuclear family, but on a much grander scale. Its narrative use is to cast more of an eye on the problems Veronica sees with income inequality and priorities of Neptune’s wealthy residents.[36] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The scene places her adrift in a sea of privilege where our sharp-tongued, always-ready protagonist is lost for words. It is only through similarly sharp-tongued, norm-defying bar owner Nicole Malloy’s (Kirby Howell-Baptiste) interruption and reframing of the encounter as deeply performative that the two women can essentially queer the space enough to provide for Veronica’s participation as a masculinized protagonist. However, the two women then isolate themselves to smoke weed in the bathroom, further excusing them from participation in this normative food-based ritual.[37]

The cocktail party itself rearticulates the class consciousness present throughout season four’s anti-gentrification storyline (a failed storyline, we learn at the finale’s flashforward). And perhaps most compellingly, the breakdown of Neptune’s fragile community ecosystem is echoed by Veronica’s own fracturing relationship, framed consistently through food. The underlying and eventually central plotline of gentrification leading to the dissolution of Neptune’s middle- and lower-class infrastructure is exemplified in Keith’s side investigation of Hu’s discount grocery store’s rat problem created by business competitors seeking to gentrify the neighborhood. Despite finding the culprit, Keith still sees the only affordable grocery store sell its storefront bodega, contributing to the final breakdown of the community exemplified through pizza delivery man Penn Epner’s unmasking as the bombing villain. The centralization of community unrest via moments of food-related commerce helps to solidify food’s role in Veronica and Logan’s relationship and in their gendering as refigured noir characters. In addition these food-related moments provide a bedrock for the narrative’s more focused (though slightly undercut, in the finale) critique, through Veronica, of therapy as trauma recovery.

Damage, trauma, and Thomas’s lone neo-noir Veronica

Earlier seasons of *Veronica Mars* established traumatic backgrounds for both Veronica and Logan (among other characters), both hinging on experiences in their youth. For Veronica, traumas of sexual assault, loss, and frequent violent encounters prove formative for potential future traumas—metaphorized in her ever-present signature taser, which she passes down to Mattie Ross during season four. Logan’s trauma stems from his own experiences of violence, centered in early seasons around the presence of his domineering and abusive father, who also attacks Veronica and has murdered her best friend pre-series. These interwoven experiences of trauma color the characters and inflect their relationship to each other throughout the series. But this pattern is disrupted by Logan’s season four efforts at recovery and his relationship to Jane (Mary McDonnell), his therapist.

Trauma, its pathology, and its treatment rest heavily, especially in the present (or



Nicole and Veronica's retreat to the bathroom sets them apart from the rest of the partygoers, engaged in their own creation of (anti-)domestic space.



A source of much consternation, Logan attends therapy, seen here in therapist Jane's office. This is a predominantly off-screen location seen only twice in the series, and is lit in a combination of high- and low-key formats.



In one of the first of Logan's many emphases on his recovery work, he says to Veronica that she is "really shrinking [his] safe space" from his place behind the kitchen counter.

recent present) moment, in the conventional framework of therapy and articulating feelings, identity, and experience to others, particularly considering the fractures in memory that accompany traumatic experience.[38] The complexities of this speaking and unspeaking of trauma, both in its ongoing experience and in efforts to treat and recover from it, are often described as experiencing and then addressing the disruption of apparently logical or typical mental patterns and the consequences thereof.[39] Ongoing efforts to recover, in Judith Herman's work, are lifelong and result in a new norm of behavioral and psychological approaches to life—namely, new constructions of self and thus of identity. Shani Orgad's as well as Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray's work on trauma and sexual assault survivorship note that identity categories[40] surrounding trauma—i.e. survivor and victim—are predicated on expectations of confession and of performative statements.

Articulating trauma has itself consistently been a focus of trauma theory, especially since the nature of the inarticulable is often predicated on victimization and a sense of absolute rupture.[41] Veronica flags her experience of divorce and infidelity in her parents' relationship and in her work as sources of trauma that complicate her relation to marriage, but she also early on dourly refers to Logan's role as an "emotionally mature adult." This attitude helps to lay the groundwork for her later critiques of his commitment to recovery, while also establishing Logan as the responsible, conforming party in the couple. His role in her life serves as a threat to Veronica's work but, as the title of this paper suggests, also makes him a key factor in her day-to-day functioning in a way often not seen onscreen. He picks up traditionally feminized domestic labor alongside exhibiting traditionally feminine-coded traits such as communication styles, expectations and interpersonal approaches.

The nature of wordlessness in the aftermath of trauma has resulted in approaches to trauma that privilege its speaking as a mode of recovery. This common prescription for trauma is echoed in Logan's continued reference to therapy and communication that Veronica summarily rejects. However, other explorations of institutional trauma have also engaged concepts of wordlessness via their engagement with the consequent stifling effects of trauma monitoring and institutional forms of silencing voices speaking trauma.[42]

Karol L Kumpfer's mode of understanding responses to trauma and stress contrasts with Caruth, Rothberg and others' approaches to trauma as he has developed a resilience model. This model sets up a process by which stressors and traumas are responded to by environmental and interactional factors (like community and family) and processes (creating self-support structures like community and family) in conjunction with internal resiliency factors related to personality (spirituality, problem-solving, et cetera) and to learning (coping mechanisms learned through past experiences), with the end goal of "resilient reintegration." [43] Kumpfer's model sets up a particular expectation of trauma recovery that hinges primarily on internal changes spurred by the traumatized subjects themselves, with little effort to address causes directly, whether the causes be cultural or interpersonal. It demands a particular kind of self-confession that results in a restructured self-identity with the ability to process more trauma more directly. Within the miniseries, such a reworking of identity is coded as fundamentally and irretrievably destabilizing and has in some ways it has been written *against* throughout the series, as Braithwaite notes in describing Veronica's noir-esque autonomy as a protection against betrayal and loss.[44]

Logan's position as a threat to Veronica's work and personality is echoed by the anti-therapy discourse that Veronica spouts throughout the series, beginning in the episode two paella scene where she says that therapy makes Logan a different



Again near the kitchen counter, Veronica cups Logan's face as she jokes about head shrinking and remembering what he looks like.



In low-lit, frustrated and confrontational domestic space, Veronica rejects "Therapy Logan" as she tries to process worries about her father's medical condition and confesses suicidal thoughts at the loss of Logan and her father.

person that she doesn't recognize. The script uses this encounter to goad Logan's character into a violent encounter that, visually, conforms to many expectations of cis male violence against women, complicated by Logan's next-morning throwaway line about non-consent. The sense that recovery creates an unidentifiable new person is only intensified by a later joke from Veronica that she "can't deal with Therapy Logan right now." [Images 45-52] Recovery, this suggests, should be avoided in order to preserve an existing sense of self, however damaged that self might be. It is in this vein that Rob Thomas claims in post-series interviews that Veronica's work has to be facilitated by damage, trauma, and effectively broken relationships. This might appear to be a compelling critique of resilience expectations, much in line with the countermanding and queering of domesticity that we see in the food-centered social cues that Veronica rejects throughout the season. However, it comes at a time when TV does not often acknowledge trauma and narratives about trauma recovery. That's especially true about noir, where festering and ever-increasing psychological damage has always been presented as a necessity of the genre. Thomas's expectation that the script presume damage and trauma seems linked to embedded expectations that resilience, to a certain degree, involves internalization and/or burying of trauma—here, less as an identity than as a preparedness tool predicated on individual responsibility and individual solutions to often systemic problems.[45]



While Rob Thomas seems certain that neo-noir demands this same commitment to the lone, traumatized, unstable detective as did early noir, his decision to cast recovery as the boogeyman of season four also serves to reiterate an intriguingly traditional focus on the suffering woman as the object of the camera lens. In a return to early noir paradigms of punishment for our would-be antiheroine, Veronica's resistance to domestic cis-heteronormativity in personal relationships relies on continued trauma and loss. Veronica is still trapped in cycles of exclusion and re-traumatization in a narrative where she appears to have worked tirelessly to escape, to queer, and to regender tried-and-true methods of gender normalization. In *Veronica Mars*, regendering and using a *homme fatale* as a homogenizing (perhaps, more accurately, heterogenizing?) force in the narrative does open space for genderqueer perspectives and queer possibilities. However, the end goal—and machinations of the scriptwriters and producers—forestall the expansion of that queer possibility because of the fabric and characterizations within the series itself. The miniseries' reframing of domesticity as the province of the *homme fatal* figure sets up the role envisioned by the script for conventional domestic existence in Veronica's life—namely, that it presents a threat to her ability to do her job. The producers may have been intended this slant to pay off by emphasizing the crime factor and thus getting renewals. However, Hulu's current position (as of Nov. 2019) is that there are no plans to renew *Veronica Mars* for a fifth season.[46]



Veronica's reaction to the prospect of



Veronica attends therapy only after

| | |
|--|---|
| couples' therapy, much-discussed in the back half of the miniseries, is one that hides her face and separates her from Logan's earnest gaze. | Logan's death, in an incongruously bright office. |
|  |  |
| Jane encourages Veronica to engage with Logan's last voicemail, which Veronica only does alone. | Veronica listens to Logan's voicemail to Jane, one solitary tear trailing down her half-lit face. |

Rebooting regendering: what's at stake?

As demonstrated by *Veronica Mars*' tenacity through two cancellations, there could be a renewal, reboot, or other continuation. It seems clear throughout this series' disjointed, semi-scrappy production history that something about Veronica speaks to an audience that is not quite done with TV's original "chick dick" and the narratives she brings with her. While it would be disingenuous to argue that *Veronica Mars*, with its general lack of central queer characters and reductive approach to its peripheral queer characters, represents a key work of "queer TV," the series is in many ways an example of the genderqueerness embedded in texts that engage in gender play, even when showrunners insist on developing scripts according to cisnormative tradition and binary-dependent plot choices.

Thomas consistently seeks out and finds ways to constrain the queer potential of his series,[47] especially as the series pushes toward an older demographic and potentially more critical cachet. The script choices that facilitate this constraint hit differently, perhaps, in 2019 than they did during the series' original early 2000s run, given shifts to more denotative queer representation and the potential for more creative depictions of less-normative regendering. An intriguing example of regendering at work in a far more entrenched public domain narrative is the casting and writing of Lucy Liu as Joan Watson in CBS's *Elementary*, which, while not within the noir genre specifically, does see creators make textual and contextual adjustments to its production to address the shifts that casting an Asian-American woman as Watson suggest or demand.[48] In a 2008 analysis of early *Veronica Mars*, Andrea Braithwaite points to a consistent and growing amount of woman-detective media offerings, [49] something I would suggest has hardly slowed down. While this one example of regendered representation cannot come to stand in for the whole of our burgeoning media environment and the production glut of quality TV, *Veronica Mars*' season 4 comes as a new version of a perhaps-tired series model that opens the door for looking backward and forward simultaneously at noir, gender, and the teen drama genre. The mini-series and its choices are embedded in and drawing from multiple creative and social fabrics. I think what is at stake here is a realization that the normative, girl-power-esque regendering of early *Veronica Mars* and its postfeminist bent meet up, in season 4's execution, with a media landscape that might allow more gender play in roles and narratives than Rob Thomas was inclined to explore.

Opening the spaces where queer possibility exists before being forestalled or where queer slippage occurs exposes the unstable nature of the binarism on which Thomas insists. There was a possibility inherent in the structuring of *Veronica Mars* as a series and of Veronica and Logan as characters. In an era of TV and film

where reboots, long-hiatus-renewals, and sequels are ever-increasing, critically attending to how and why these reboots, renewals, and sequels reproduce or evade the compositional strategies of their source texts can help us explore the spaces where creativity and change occur and the structures that work to forestall both.

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Notes

1. Concept comes from Lucy Baker, "Girl!Version: The Feminist Framework for Regendered Characters in Fanwork," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 4, no. 1 (2016): 23–36, https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.4.1.23_1.
2. Among these are Rule 63, in reference to an unofficial Internet "rule", gender swap, gender bend, gender fuck, and the term used here—regendering. Clearly, different terms themselves rest upon different ideas of gender and of the purpose of regendering, as some rest upon a binary gender framework, while others emphasize the disruptive and perhaps playful nature of this mode of storytelling in fanwork.
3. Rick Porter, "Veronica Mars' Creator on What's Next After That Stunning Ending," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 2019.
4. Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1993).
5. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1995).
6. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128–38; Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*.
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).
8. Lynne Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console," in *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics*, ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham (London: Routledge, 2009), 15–47.
9. Baker, "Girl!Version: The Feminist Framework for Regendered Characters in Fanwork."
10. Alexis Lothian, "Doing Boys like They're Girls, and Other (Trans)Gendered Subjects: The Queer Subcultural Politics of 'Genderfuck' Fan Fiction," in *LA Queer Studies Conference* (Los Angeles, 2008), <http://www.queergeektheory.org/2008/10/doing-boys-like-they-re-girls-and-other-transgendered-subjects-the-queer-subcultural-politics-of-genderfuck-fan-fiction/>.
11. Ann McClellan, "Redefining Genderswap Fan Fiction: A Sherlock Case Study," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 17 (March 25, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0553>.
12. Samantha Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 5.

13. Lindop, p. 10.

14. Megan Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 207.

15. Abbott, p. 207.

16. Andrea Braithwaite, “‘That Girl of Yours-She’s Pretty Hardboiled, Huh?’ : Detecting Feminism in Veronica Mars,” in *Teen Television : Essays on Programming and Fandom*, ed. Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 132–49.

17. Alaine Martaus, “‘You Get Tough. You Get Even’: Rape, Anger, Cynicism, and the Vigilante Girl Detective in Veronica Mars,” *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 27, no. 1 (September 1, 2009): 74–86.

18. Braithwaite, “‘That Girl of Yours-She’s Pretty Hardboiled, Huh?’ : Detecting Feminism in Veronica Mars,” 137–38. Braithwaite’s use of “wrong body,” here, draws from Linda Mizejewski and emphasizes Veronica’s upending of expectations of detecting bodies.

19. Baker, “Girl!Version: The Feminist Framework for Regendered Characters in Fanwork.”

20. Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema.*, p. 1. [[return to page 2](#)]

21. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

22. Here, one can consider an important noir femme fatale—Barbara Stanwyck’s Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (1944). A cheating and eventually murderous wife who attempts to kill not only her husband but also the protagonist in Fred MacMurray’s Walter Neff, she’s directly characterized as “a little more rotten” than Neff is by the script itself and by her role as instigator in their murder plot. Dietrichson is far from the only femme fatale character to play this role—nor is she the only one to die in the course of doing it.

23. Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema.*

24. Braithwaite, “‘That Girl of Yours-She’s Pretty Hardboiled, Huh?’ : Detecting Feminism in Veronica Mars,” 141.

25. Rick Porter, “‘Veronica Mars’ Creator on What’s Next After That Stunning Ending,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/veronica-mars-season-4-explained-rob-thomas-interview-1225788>.

26. Porter.

27. Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

28. Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, 125-141.

29. Angel Daniel Matos, “Something’s Flaming in the Kitchen: Exploring the Kitchen as a Stage of Gay Domesticity in *Queer as Folk*,” *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 119–33, https://doi.org/10.1386/qsmc.2.1.119_1.

30. Mary Douglas Vavrus, “Domesticating Patriarchy: Hegemonic Masculinity and Television’s ‘Mr. Mom,’” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 3

(2002): 352–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180216564>.

31. Marjorie DeVault, “Family Discourse and Everyday Practice: Gender and Class at the Dinner Table,” *Syracuse Scholar* 11, no. 1 (1991): 2.

32. Richard Wilk, “Power at the Table: Food Fights and Happy Meals,” *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies* 10, no. 6 (2010): 428–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708610372764>.

33. Reed W. Larson, Kathryn R. Branscomb, and Angela R. Wiley, “Forms and Functions of Family Mealtimes: Multidisciplinary Perspectives,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 111 (2006): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.152>.

34. Larson, Branscomb, and Wiley.

35. Jacqueline Botterill, “The Dinner Party: Reworking Tradition through Contemporary Performance,” in *How Canadians Communicate: Food Promotion, Consumption, and Controversy*, ed. Charlene Elliott (Athabasca University Press, 2016), 89–105, <https://doi.org/10.15215/aupress/9781771990257.01>.

36. Despite the attention *Veronica Mars* has, in the past, paid in its script and style to Neptune’s racial stratification and the extent to which racial stereotyping, especially of Wallace as a young Black man, affects Neptune social dynamics, there is little attention paid to that dynamic in this scene or other scenes with Wallace or Howell-Baptiste’s Nicole in the miniseries. In fact, the clearest attention to the racial dynamics introduced to this bourgeois white space by Wallace and Nicole’s Blackness does come in this scene but articulated by Veronica as she invents two children named Hakeem and Olajuwon (a deep cut reference by Rob Thomas to the Houston Rockets Center of the same name) while talking to a pregnant white mother about her difficulties getting children into private school. [[return to page 3](#)]

37. This may also represent another layering of racial stereotyping within the narrative/depictions of the miniseries, wherein Nicole is written as the impetus for drug use in the bathroom following her prior characterization as violent, if justifiably so.

38. Nigel C. Hunt, “Approaches to Understanding Trauma,” in *Memory, War and Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61–80.

39. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2015).

40. It is valuable to note the general tendency to ascribe these identities and these processes of recovery to adults—the focus of Herman’s book, and of much of the existing humanistic explorations of trauma, is on the experience of trauma (even and perhaps especially childhood trauma) on adults, despite an acknowledgement and explorations of childhood contexts of traumatic experience.

41. Cathy Caruth, “Unclaimed Experience : Trauma and the Possibility of History,” *Yale French Studies Literature*, no. 79 (1991): 181–92; Marianne Hirsch, “Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103–27.

42. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (Bergahn Books, 2013); Michael Traynor, “Guest Editorial: What’s Wrong with Resilience,” *Journal of Research in Nursing* 23, no. 1 (2018): 5–8,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987117751458>.

43. Karol L Kumpfer, "Factors and Processes Contributing to Resilience: The Resilience Framework," in *Resilience and Development: Positive Life Adaptations*, ed. M D Glantz and J L Johnson (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999), 179–224.
44. Braithwaite, "“That Girl of Yours-She’s Pretty Hardboiled, Huh?” : Detecting Feminism in Veronica Mars,” 139.
45. Karol L Kumpfer, "Factors and Processes Contributing to Resilience: The Resilience Framework," in *Resilience and Development: Positive Life Adaptations*, ed. M D Glantz and J L Johnson (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999), 179–224; Anneliese Singh, *The Queer & Transgender Resilience Workbook* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2018); Lisa Bowleg et al., "Triple Jeopardy and beyond: Multiple Minority Stress and Resilience among Black Lesbians," in *Trauma, Stress, and Resilience among Sexual Minority Women: Rising like the Phoenix*, ed. Kimberly F Balsam (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2003), 87–108.
46. Michael Ausiello, "Veronica Mars Update: No Current Plans for a Season 5 at Hulu," *TVLine*, 2019, <https://tvline.com/2019/11/12/veronica-mars-season-5-hulu-status-kristen-bell/>.
47. Alongside the narrative and representational choices enumerated in the paper, the sudden and abrupt forestalling of Veronica’s burgeoning semi-romantic friendship with Nicole seems to follow this same pattern.
48. *Elementary*’s work is particularly interesting on a network (CBS) generally known for conservatism and an older demographic. Hulu, on the other hand, has been building a brand of boundary-pushing, quality TV.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Ethen Hawke (left) and Sarah Snook star in *Predestination* (2014), an adaptation of the 1958 time-travel story “—All You Zombies—” by Robert A. Heinlein.

Science fiction paradox and the transgender look: how time travel queers spectatorship in *Predestination*

by [Jenée Wilde](#)

Genre, gender, and representation



Noah Taylor (right) plays Mr. Robinson, director of the Temporal Agency that recruits John as a temporal agent.

The Australian science fiction film *Predestination* (Spierig and Spierig 2014) is unusual for its representation of an intersex protagonist who medically transitions, albeit unwillingly, from female to male. Produced at a time when images of trans people were still rare in mainstream cinema, the film stands out for this alone.

Yet representation *by itself* is not necessarily positive or progressive, as critics of the film have shown. While the movie offers a strong and interesting intersex protagonist, says film critic Hanna Schenkel, its depiction of the character conflates intersex and trans identities, as well as “reinforces the overly medicalised and sexualised focus with which mainstream media usually analyses trans experiences” (2015: 58). Schenkel grounds her social critique of the film in the very real material conditions faced by trans and intersex people and the effects that negative, stereotypical media portrayals have on real lives:

“If sex and gender transitions were as fictional as time travel, [*Predestination*] would have been an amazing story, but trans and intersex people really exist and are highly stigmatized” (Schenkel 2015: 60).

In spite of the film’s “horrifying” and “distressingly accurate” representation of the violence done to intersex people by normative medical practices, Schenkel condemns the movie for “cast[ing] the protagonist as an inhuman, impossible and even monstrous being, morally ambiguous and sexually deviant” (2015: 60-61).

Schenkel’s analysis follows Richard Dyer (2002) in assessing the political stakes involved in the representation of women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ people, and other oppressed groups in cinematic media. As Dyer notes in *The Matter of Images*, analysis of these images often centers on a critique of power, social normativity, and institutionalized inequality that have arisen from “the feeling that how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life, [and] that poverty, harassment, self-hate and discrimination [...] are shored up and instituted by representation” (2002: 1). Indeed, Dyer says, the resonances of the term “representation”—as in “presented over again”—suggest not only how

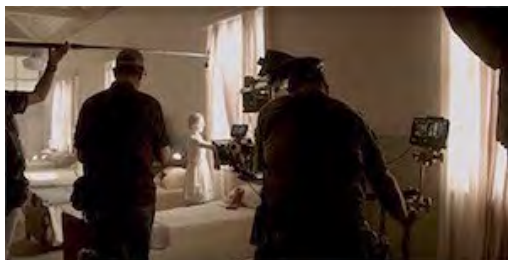




In their “making-of” documentary, writers and directors Peter and Michael Spierig discuss how they adapted Robert A. Heinlein’s short story into a feature film (Spierig and Spierig 2013).



The *Predestination* design team conducted multiple screen tests of the makeup and prosthetics used to convincingly transform actor Sarah Snook from Jane into John (Spierig and Spierig 2013).



members of a group see themselves but also how others see that group and their place and rights within society (2002: 1).

I agree with Schenkel and Dyer’s observations that the social and political stakes of representation for trans people and other marginalized groups mean that their specific portrayals in films *matter*. As cultural critics, we must be willing to call out problematic images in order to bring attention to and push back against the modes by which social inequities are instituted and sustained in popular culture artifacts. However, I believe there is more than one way to achieve this necessary political work. Attention to the effects of representation in film *alone* may overlook more subtle effects, such as how narrative and genre influence spectatorship.

As Dyer reminds us, images in film must use “the codes and conventions of the available cultural forms” at the time of their production (2002: 2). In the case of *Predestination*, the film is a close adaptation of a 1958 short story by U.S. author Robert A. Heinlein. As such, the codes and conventions of 1950s time-travel science fiction are not only crucial to its narrative structure and intersex character portrayal, but also are the means by which audience expectations are overturned with unanticipated results. As Dyer cautions, “Without understanding the way images function in terms of, say, narrative, genre or spectacle, we don’t really understand why they turn out the way they do” (2002: 2).

I wish to suggest that when one pays attention to how images function in terms of narrative, genre, and spectatorship in *Predestination*, the film performs some surprisingly productive political work upon a viewing audience that, for the purposes of my analysis, I frame as “mainstream”—that is, cisgendered, heteronormative viewers who comprehend others through conventional frameworks of gender and sexuality. Let me be clear: like Dyer (2002) and Doty (1993), I do recognize that varieties of response are always available to and within any given audience, group, and/or individual reader/viewer. I also recognize that queer, trans, and/or intersex viewers and their allies may interpret and engage with the film in ways other than I describe here, though such an analysis is outside the scope of this paper.

Rather, my interest here is in understanding how *Predestination* may work to undermine mainstream audience assumptions about gender and sexuality through an analysis of its particular generic and cinematic features. When critics read the film’s representation of intersex and trans identity through *cinematic naturalism* or *realism*, where verisimilitude requires events to happen according to natural possibilities, they treat as insignificant or irrelevant the film’s *non-naturalistic* genre characteristics and their effects on mainstream audience perception. As a result, I argue that they overlook how the time-travel narrative enables a transgender look or gaze (Halberstam 2005) that radically destabilizes the mainstream spectator’s cisgender assumptions. Using science fiction theory alongside analyzing cinematic features that create a transgender look, I will explore how the film’s narrative paradox combines with audience expectations and identification to push viewers to look deeper for meanings about gender and self-identity. Specifically, I will suggest that precisely *because* it defies real-world verisimilitude, the film’s transgender gaze *queers* spectatorship for mainstream audiences and upends the contemporary Western binary epistemology that those viewers may rely on to “know” and understand the gender and sexuality of another.

“Wait—what happened?”



To save on costs for their independent film, *Predestination* producers found locations that could be used multiple times. A key site was the Abbotsford Convent in Melbourne, where spaces in this multi-arts center were transformed into period sets, including a 1940s orphanage and 1960s apartments in Brooklyn and Cleveland (Spierig and Spierig 2013).



While Heinlein's short story takes place in a bar, the Spierig Brothers' film expands the narrative to embrace the full life of the time-traveling protagonist.



The Unmarried Mother bets a bottle of whisky that the Barkeep won't believe how he knows "the women's angle" so well in his confession stories.

When I write this discussion question down before screening *Predestination* in my film classes, students usually think I'm kidding. By the time the movie is over, however, they realize the question is no joke as demonstrated by the stunned and perplexed looks on their faces. When the lights come back up, we spend a good deal of class unraveling (or trying to) the looping Mobius strip that is the film's puzzle plot. For a story with only one primary character and one secondary character, the film takes multiple viewings to fully grasp its complex and folding timeline. So let me begin here by summarizing the story's set up and thoroughly spoiling the plot twists.

"What if I could put him in front of you—the man who ruined your life? And if I could guarantee you'd get away with it, would you kill him?"

With these words in voiceover, *Predestination* launches viewers into a mind-bending time-travel narrative spanning an alternate version of mid-20th century United States, from the 1940s to the 1990s. The film meticulously adapts and expands upon Heinlein's short story "—All You Zombies—" (2008), which explores a chicken-and-egg progenitor paradox through a time-traveling intersex protagonist.

In that ten-page story, a young man who writes women's magazine confession stories under the name of The Unmarried Mother walks into Pop's Bar in New York City, Time Zone 1970. When the Barkeep asks him how he knows "the women's angle" so well in his stories, the young man says, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you." He replies, "Bartenders and psychiatrists learn that nothing is stranger than truth. [...] Nothing astonishes me." The Unmarried Mother snorts and says, "Want to bet the rest of the bottle?" The Barkeep offers a full bottle on the bet, and so the young man begins, "When I was a little girl—" (Heinlein 2008: 552-53).

Likewise, *Predestination's* looping narrative complexity starts with that unexpected phrase and flashes back through the protagonist's early life as Jane and her upbringing in an orphanage. "I never understood why my parents abandoned me," John says in voiceover as he narrates his story, "What had I done wrong?" Growing up, Jane had felt different from other girls and stronger than even the boys, both a fighter and smart. However, sex confused Jane; she didn't understand how the parts were supposed to work together.[1] [[open endnotes and references in new window](#)]

As a young woman, Jane was recruited by Mr. Robinson to join the SpaceCorp, a "progressive" program to train women as "companions" for astronauts in space. Jane excelled in the training, though she confessed during a psychological assessment that something felt "out of balance," like she was "living in someone else's body." After a fight with another girl and a more thorough medical examination, Jane was disqualified from service in the Corps. Trying to get back into the program, Jane was working as a mother's helper and taking charm school classes when she met a young man. After a whirlwind romance and subsequent pregnancy, Jane knew she would never get back into the Corps.

After childbirth, doctors informed Jane that she possessed both female *and* male



The protagonist tells their backstory through a series of flashbacks, starting with how Jane felt different from the other girls in the orphanage where she grew up.



Jane is recruited into SpaceCorp, a “progressive” program to train women as “companions” for astronauts in space, but is disqualified from the program after a fight leads to a more thorough medical exam.



After Jane gives birth, doctors inform her that she has two full sets of reproductive organs, and that complications during the cesarean delivery necessitated a hysterectomy and sex change operation to construct a male urinary tract.



sex organs, and that complications during the cesarean delivery necessitated a hysterectomy and sex change operation to construct a male urinary tract, much to her shock and dismay. Eleven months and three surgeries later, Jane had fully transitioned into John. “I was as ruined as woman could be,” John says to the Barkeep, “I was no longer a woman [...] and I didn’t know how to be a man.”

When John finishes his story, the Barkeep asks, “What if I could put him in front of you—the man who ruined your life?” Things start to get *really* complicated as the Barkeep is revealed to be a Time Agent recruiting John on behalf of Mr. Robinson for a job in the Temporal Agency. John’s time travel commences with a trip back to 1963. With a gun provided by the Time Agent, he sets out to kill the man who ruined him—only to bump unexpectedly into Jane in charm school. In that shocking moment, John realizes that he and the man who ruined his life are one and the same.

Before exploring my critical reading of the film, I believe understanding some of the contexts of the film’s production will help to illuminate the significance of genre in the critical analysis that I propose. According to media interviews, German-Australian film directors and twin brothers Peter and Michael Spierig set out to create a faithful adaptation of Heinlein’s science fictional time-travel narrative: “There’s something wonderful about adapting another person’s work because it changes your voice as a writer,” Peter said. “And that was the thing we learnt doing this: that Heinlein’s voice is all through the film” (cited in Hoskin 2015: 9). The first time Peter read Heinlein’s short story, he said it blew his mind. “I read it about seven years ago and it’s just stuck with me,” Peter said. “I’ve never read anything like this. It was written in 1958 and even now it’s kind of shocking in certain parts, and still completely relevant and highly original.” His brother Michael added, “It’s 60 years ahead of its time” (cited in Russell 2016).

Because the short story is more expositional than cinematic, the brothers relied on character development and the outstanding performances of actors Ethan Hawke and Sarah Snook to carry the story’s opening conceit of a man in a bar telling his life story on a bet (Hoskin 2015: 10):

“I love the idea that this person says, ‘I’ve got the best story you’ve ever heard,’ and so they’re telling that story to win a prize. So I think, in that sense, the expositional element works, and I also think the movie has so many complex ideas that certain things need to be laid out—like, ‘This is my character. This is who I am. This is my life. I was a little girl when this happened’—because so much complex stuff is coming.” (cited in Hoskin 2015: 10)

Though the Spierig Brothers see the film primarily as a time-travel thriller, they were well aware of the necessity for the audience to believe in an actor playing the role of the intersex protagonist both before and after the unasked-for sex change (Hoskin 2015: 11). “Until [Sarah Snook] came on board, we really had no idea whether it was going to work. And she handled it with such a delicate, intelligent, well-researched approach,” Michael said. “I mean, one of her friends was going through the change—female to male—and she spent a lot of time with that person researching.” Peter added, “But talking more about identity and things like that—who that person is. Not so much the physical, but the mental, the social aspects of that” (cited in Hoskin 2015: 11).

Snook discussed the challenges of her character in a documentary about the making of *Predestination*. “The saving grace is I’m not playing a man,” she noted, “I’m playing a man who was once a woman.” In conversations with her friend who transitioned from female to male, she gained insight not only into the process of



After John finishes the real story of The Unwed Mother, the Barkeep reveals he is a Time Agent recruiting John on behalf of Mr. Robinson for a job in the Temporal Agency, and John's time travel commences with a trip back to 1963 to confront the man who ruined his life.

transitioning but also “how you feel mentally and emotionally, what things you feel like you do have control over and what things you don't have control over. That gave a really good foundation and background from which to work from” (Spierig and Spierig 2013).

When interviewed about recreating the character's gender transition physically, Michael said they “didn't want to hide Sarah under a tonne of rubber or go for the joke shop beard, because you want to be emotionally connected [to the character]” (cited in Russell 2016). While the protagonist is intersex, Peter emphasized that *Predestination* wasn't written as a niche queer film but rather was intended for mainstream audiences: “We're proud that the intersex angle isn't a ‘message,’ it's just part of this character's life and experiences, and I love that” (cited in Russell 2016).

While the filmmakers consider genre characteristics to be central to the film narrative, the Spierig brothers seem equally aware of the need for empathetic character portrayals to sustain audience engagement through the complicated science fiction plot twists. As such, *Predestination* moves beyond mere genre action thriller to engage with dramatic realism by presenting the emotional and relational development of realistic characters. As I will show, this character realism opens the way for mainstream audience identification with the protagonist that, when combined with the non-realistic time-travel narrative, ultimately upends their assumptions about gender.

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While *Predestination* is set in an alternate past, its science fiction narrative is driven by the congruence of futuristic technology with the protagonist's desire for self-knowledge. The film's strange narrative twists are possible precisely *because* science fiction extends verisimilitude by expanding its "what if" scenarios into the unknown.

Science fiction and the transgender look

To understand the complex ways that representation functions in relation to genre in *Predestination*, we first must understand some of science fiction's generic attributes. In "The Fantastic," Vivian Sobchack (1996) discusses core characteristics that distinguish science fiction films from other non-naturalistic genres that extend or defy verisimilitude. Sobchack says science fiction, horror, and fantasy action adventure "each imaginatively constructs alternative —'fantastic'—worlds and tells stories of impossible experiences that defy rational logic and currently known empirical laws," but they all literally "realize" the imagination in different ways (1996: 312). In the case of science fiction, "the genre's drive into the 'unknown' is characterized by bold epistemological curiosity" that overrides any underlying fear of strangeness and "resonates with an empirical and technological optimism and openness" (Sobchack 1996: 315). As the most realistic of the three fantastical genres, science fiction "sees the congruence of empirical knowledge and personal desire as possible, but recognizes that its achievement is always partial and dependent upon the progressive development of technologies as well as upon the rationality of personal desire" (Sobchack 1996: 315). Through robots, non-human intelligences, and other technologized bodies, the science fiction genre is obsessed with the remaking of the human body in a manner that "glitter[s] with the promise and threat of an appealing yet heartless rationality" (Sobchack 1996: 315-16).

These generic attributes of science fiction can be seen in *Predestination*. While the film is set in an alternate past, its narrative is driven by the congruence of futuristic technology with the protagonist's desire for self-knowledge. Moreover, the protagonist's intersex body is technologically made and remade through medical intervention and time travel that enable their birth as Jane and transition into John. And by boldly accepting the Temporal Agency's offer to become an Agent, Jane/John comes to understand who they are, where they came from, and what their purpose in life is—both as a Time Agent and, later, as the Fizzle Bomber. These strange narrative twists are possible precisely *because* science fiction extends verisimilitude by expanding its "what if" scenarios into the unknown.

Literary theory also offers insights into science fiction as a mode of writing (and reading) that is distinct from naturalistic and fantastical prose. In her essay "Speculations: The Subjunctivity of Science Fiction," Joanna Russ (1995) explores the implications of author Samuel Delany's definition of science fiction as a particular mode of writing that entangles a reader's experience of *genre* with the grammatical *mood* of the sentence. Delany writes,

"Subjunctivity is the tension on the thread of meaning that runs between word and object. [For] a piece of reportage, a blanket indicative tension informs the whole series: *this happened*.... The subjunctivity for a series of words labeled naturalistic fiction is defined by: *could have happened*.... Fantasy takes the subjunctivity of naturalistic fiction and throws it in reverse...*could not have happened*.... [In] SF the subjunctivity level is changed once more...*have not happened*."



A sense of estrangement from what we know is crucial to the effect of *Predestination* on mainstream viewers. When the characters start time traveling and John realizes who the man who ruined his life actually is, everything viewers think they know about the protagonist is defamiliarized, forcing them to question previous assumptions about the nature of gendered embodiment, the mutability of identity, and the meaning of love.

“Events that have not happened are very different from the fictional events that could have happened, or the fantastic events that could not have happened.” (cited in Russ 1995: 16, emphasis in original)

Given this, Russ says, science fiction stands in a paradoxical relation to both fantasy and naturalism; it neither contravenes reality (as fantasy does) nor represents it (as naturalism does) (1995: 16-17). Whereas fantasy often imitates the structure of the pastoral, having a frame of the familiar around the strange or fantastic, most science fiction is naturalistic in style and usually begins *in medias res* (Russ 1995: 20). And because most science fiction has no frame, Russ says, “A reader judges the science-fictional-ness of what happens by what he himself knows of the actual world; that is, *the reader carries his frame with him*” (1995: 21, emphasis in original). As such, elements that would constitute the fame or the most “real” part of the narrative in naturalism—news reports, geographic data, histories, encyclopedic information, and so on—appear the most outlandish and the least believable in science fiction. “Such elements are pure Brechtian alienation,” Russ says, “they are *not so* and they pretend extra-hard to be so” (1995: 21, emphasis in original). Confronted with *events that have not happened*, science fiction readers experience a sense of dislocation in a strange world that is nevertheless presented as naturalistic and familiar to its characters. Russ says, from the writer's perspective,

“Science fiction writers conceive of the relation between possibility and impossibility very differently than the writers we are used to. Their work has an analogous shifting, paradoxical quality. [...] When the question of possibility comes up in science fiction, the author can only reply that nobody knows. We haven't been there yet” (1995: 22).

So whether reading science fiction novels or watching science fiction films, audiences experience a sense of estrangement from the real world that, nevertheless, is not pure fantasy; the events merely have not happened *yet* and might be possible with sufficient scientific and technological progress. Literary theorist Darko Suvin termed this psychological effect as “cognitive estrangement”—i.e., an estrangement from the author's empirical reality that is “perceived as not impossible within the cognitive (cosmological and anthropological) norms of the author's epoch” (1979: viii).

This sense of estrangement from what we know to be “real” is crucial to the effect of *Predestination* on audiences. Viewers may at first believe they have a handle on the narrative, as it is set in our recent past. Even the introduction of the intersex protagonist may be unexpected but not all that unusual these days—until, that is, young John travels back in time and new revelations challenge everything viewers *think* they know about the protagonist. Through the estranging effect of science fiction, mainstream audiences are forced to question their previous assumptions about the nature of gendered embodiment, the mutability of identity, and the meaning of love.

Audience estrangement is usually achieved through the introduction of a science fictional “novum” (i.e. an innovation or novelty) that asserts a hegemonic dominance on the narrative world as deviating from the author's norm of reality (Suvin 1979: 64). The novum creates an “*alternate reality*,” Suvin says, “one that possesses a *different historical time* corresponding to different human relationships and sociocultural norms actualized by the narration” (1979: 71, emphasis in original). This alternate reality tacitly presupposes the author's empirical reality and, as such, creates an estranging effect on the reader (or viewer) by forcing an oscillation of perspective between world views, allowing the reader to see empirical reality from the new perspective gained (Suvin 1979: 71).

For authors wishing to challenge the social status quo of the here-and-now, the

“what if” novum and estranging tendency of science fiction provide opportunities to imagine alternate realities with radically different (or the potential for different) social norms and structures. In regard to gender and sexuality, for example, estranging novums have been generated from questions such as:

- what if there was a world without men (e.g. Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* [1975]) or
- what if it was without women (e.g. Lois McMaster Bujold, *Ethan of Athos* [1986]);
- what if a world had no gender (e.g. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* [1969]) or
- what if it had a multiplicity of genders and sexual orientations (e.g. Melissa Scott, *Shadow Man* [1995]); and
- what if a world’s sexual and family relationships were not based on gender at all (e.g. Diane Duane, *Door into Fire* [1979]).



Unlike films that expose the transgender body as *trans* late in the film, *Predestination* reveals the protagonist’s intersex trans body early in the narrative when John tells the Barkeep how he achieves the “women’s angle” in his writing.

In the case of the 1958 story “—All You Zombies—”, Heinlein generates an estranging “what if” scenario from the dual novums of true hermaphroditism and time travel. As my later reading of the film will show, by expanding Heinlein’s science fictional scenario into a full-length feature film, *Predestination* may work to estrange cisgendered, heteronormative viewers from their assumptions about gendered and sexual subjectivity in the here-and-now.

Through a novum’s estranging effects, science fiction opens possibilities for representing non-normative gender and sexuality that has often been restricted or erased from view in popular fiction. As such, the genre may be deployed by some authors as a means of questioning normative ideas of gender and sexuality in the “real” world. For example, in *Feminism and Science Fiction*, Sarah Lefanu describes what science fiction narratives may allow in terms of gender representation. When the rational discourse of science is combined with the pre-rational language of the unconscious encountered in fantasy, horror, mythology, and fairy tales, Lefanu says, science fiction makes possible “the inscription of women as subjects free from the constraints of mundane fiction” and offers “the possibility of interrogating that very inscription, questioning the basis of gendered subjectivity” (1988: 9). Not only do science fictional narratives defamiliarize social hierarchies through “what if” estrangements, they also make alternatives to the “real” world more familiar through the release from realism in the process of storytelling (Lefanu 1988: 21). In this tension between the possible and impossible (or the not yet possible), Lefanu says, science fiction tends toward open-endedness and the dissolution of structures and thereby interrogates and subverts unitary ways of seeing (1988: 22). Moreover, by breaking down Cartesian certainties and de-centering a coherent self, science fiction offers the means to construct subjectivities that replace absence/otherness with presence in a preponderantly (white, heterosexual) male discourse (1998: 23).

In the case of *Predestination*, the novums of true hermaphroditism and time travel create a release from realism that enable the construction of a protagonist with a unique subjectivity not available in mainstream naturalistic narratives. That critics have decried the intersex protagonist as not “realistic” in terms of the here-and-now may be a red herring. More politically significant, I believe, is how viewer estrangement and disorientation work in conjunction with the cinematic elements described next. In fact, they queer audience perception, thus challenging what mainstream audiences “know” about gender and sexuality in the here-and-now.



Genre characteristics are only one part of the equation when it comes to the film’s effects on cisgender, heteronormative viewers. Equally important are narrative and cinematic techniques that engage psychological processes of viewer identification with characters in order to construct a transgender look. Since the



The protagonist undergoes unwilling sex reassignment after doctors discover their intersex condition. During the long hospital stay, they practice talking like a man, saying over and over, "Hello, my name is Jane." This powerful moment captures the contradictions of the protagonist's identity, including their no-longer appropriate given name. Scenes that portray the violence done to Jane/John by social and medical institutions that rigidly enforce the boundaries of gender solicit viewer empathy for the protagonist and give viewers access to a transgender gaze.



1970s, feminist film theorists have been interrogating the cinematic "gaze" or "look"—often presumed to be cisgender and male in classic Hollywood cinema—and what happens when the gaze in women's or trans films challenges these mainstream norms. In particular, Judith Halberstam's theory of "the transgender gaze or look" (2005: 76) explores the nature of gender and embodiment in trans films and offers an important theoretical lens through which to read *Predestination's* cinematic features.

Halberstam notes that gender ambiguity and the body's potential to morph and change in a variety of ways is a "powerful fantasy" in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century cinema (2005: 76). In films with transgender characters like *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), Halberstam says, "the transgender character surprises audiences with his/her ability to remain attractive, appealing, and gendered while simultaneously presenting a gender at odds with sex, a sense of self not derived from the body, and an identity that operates within the heterosexual matrix without confirming the inevitability of that system of difference" (2005: 76). At the same time, the transgender body also "represents a form a rigidity, an insistence on particular forms of recognition" that may be punished in popular representations for its failure "to conform to the postmodern fantasy of flexibility that has been projected onto the transgender body." This is why Dil in *The Crying Game* and Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry* "are represented as both heroic and fatally flawed" (Halberstam 2005: 77).

While the protagonist in *Predestination* is intersex and transitions unwillingly, Halberstam's observations about trans characters ring true of Jane/John's representation. Growing up, Jane's athleticism, aggressiveness, and intelligence set her apart from other girls in her orphanage, and she is repeatedly passed up for adoption because of those differences. As a SpaceCorp recruit, she appears to rise above other trainees but again is rejected because of her failure to fully embody womanhood. And while pregnancy seems finally to confirm her sex, the cesarean birth of her child exposes her intersex condition to the medical establishment's gender-policing male gaze. Because of these and other failures to perform womanhood adequately, Jane's intersex body is punished in the film through forced sex reassignment surgery.

Halberstam says films like *The Crying Game* and *Boys Don't Cry* "rely on the successful solicitation of affect—whether it be revulsion, sympathy, or empathy—in order to give mainstream viewers access to a transgender gaze" (2005: 77). Similarly, *Predestination* evokes audience empathy by using a relatively unknown actor to credibly perform a gender identity at odds with cisgender expectations. Unlike films that expose the transgender body *as trans* late in the film, *Predestination* reveals the protagonist's intersex trans body early in the narrative to solicit viewer empathy for the violence done to Jane/John by social and medical institutions that rigidly enforce the boundaries of gender.

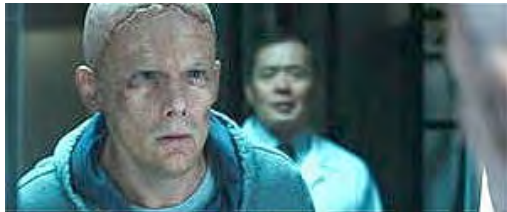
For example, while Jane fails to perform femininity early in life, after the sex reassignment surgeries John likewise fails to perform masculinity. In a scene from their long hospital stay, a medium close-up shot shows the protagonist from behind, sitting on a hospital bed, hair pulled back, smoking. "The hormones they gave me deepened my voice, but not enough," John says in a voiceover, "so I started practicing talking like a man." Cutting to a closeup of their face, the protagonist says over and over: "Hello, my name is Jane." This powerful moment captures the contradictions of the protagonist's identity, including their no-longer appropriate given name. As the camera holds a close-up of the character's face,



Jane/John struggles to hold back tears: “Hello, my name is Jane. It’s a lovely day.”

Halberstam says the transgender gaze in film

“confronts powerfully the way that transgenderism is constituted as a paradox made up in equal parts of visibility and temporality: whenever the transgender character *is seen* to be transgendered, then he/she is both failing to pass and threatening to expose a rupture between the distinct temporal registers of past, present, and future.” (2005: 77, emphasis mine)



In a final montage sequence, the “rewind” look is used to resolve the science fiction film’s temporal paradoxes—both cinematic and narrative. The transgender gaze in this sequence gives viewers access to the protagonist’s *subjective* experience of events, enables watchers to grasp the profound paradox of Jane/John’s life, and queers audience perception by upending assumptions regarding the nature of gender, desire, and identity.

In my reading of this quotation, it is not the trans character *per se* that is paradoxical; rather it is the audience’s *perception* of the character that constitutes the paradox. After the audience has accepted a character’s gender presentation as female or male early in the film, later exposure of the person *as transgender* disorients the cisgender gaze and upends viewer assumptions. As a result, Halberstam says this transgender gaze ruptures temporal registers causing “the audience to reorient themselves in relation to the film’s past in order to read the film’s present and prepare themselves for the film’s future” (2005: 78). Thus, access to this transgender look “depends on complex relations in time and space between seeing and not seeing, appearing and disappearing, knowing and not knowing” (Halberstam 2005: 78). In other words, the epistemological uncertainty introduced by transgenderism queers the looking *itself* by disrupting static cisgender binaries and thrusting the audience into a new temporal relationship with the film’s narrative logic.

Halberstam identifies several modes of looking that work to resolve for spectators the visible and temporal paradoxes introduced in transgender films. One mode seen in *The Crying Game* is the “rewind” look, in which the trans character at first “passes” as properly located in the linear narrative as his/her gender presentation, only to be exposed as transgender at the film’s narrative climax. At that point, spectators must rewind the narrative in their minds in order for its logic to make sense in terms of the character’s gender identity (Halberstam 2005: 78).

Predestination also uses the rewind mode of looking, but not to resolve a visible paradox as the audience knows the protagonist’s trans identity almost from the beginning. Rather, in a montage sequence at the end of the film, the rewind look is used to resolve the science fiction film’s *temporal* paradoxes—both cinematic and narrative. At the film’s conclusion, a flashback montage reorders the time-traveling protagonist’s life events chronologically. In a sequence of quick cuts, we see Jane’s youth and training in SpaceCorp, their sex reassignment into John, their recruitment into the Temporal Agency, the bombing injury that severely burns John’s face and vocal cords, the reconstructive surgery that changes their appearance, the manipulation of events that ensures their own birth as Jane, and their retirement from the Temporal Agency. This rewind look ensures that viewers understand that Jane, John, the Time Agent, and Fizzle Bomber are all one and the same person. At this climactic moment, the rewind look gives viewers access to the protagonist’s *subjective* experience of events and enables viewers to grasp (if they haven’t already) the profound nature of a paradox as a self-contradiction that exposes a deeper truth. In this case, the paradox upends viewer assumptions regarding the nature of gender, desire, and subjectivity.

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Many scenes subtly “double” the intersex transgender character by exchanging looks between Jane, John, the Time Agent, and Fizzle Bomber—long before the audience realizes that they are all the same person. The “doubling” mode of looking serves to create a cinematic space that refuses a cisgender gaze by removing it as the normative point of reference.

While a rewind mode looks *at* trans characters, Halberstam says, a second mode seen in *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998) and *Southern Comfort* (2001) enables audiences “to look *with* the transgender character instead of *at* him” by deploying certain formal techniques that support viewer identification with the trans protagonist and give cisgendered viewers access to a transgender gaze (2005: 78). Several cinematic techniques enable this mode of viewing. For instance, “doubling” the trans character on screen—by having a character look at themselves in a photo or mirror, or by having two or more trans characters look at each other—serves to create a cinematic space that refuses a cisgender gaze by removing it as the normative point of reference. In addition, “ghosting” through photographs, audio recordings, home movies, and the like allows an absent or deceased trans character to haunt visual and narrative spaces and to defy the boundaries of past, present, and future (Halberstam 2005: 78). Moreover, filmmakers can deploy the cinematic grammar of shot/reverse shot to force spectators into adopting the gaze of a transgender character. In classic Hollywood film text, when the camera looks from one position/character’s point of view then returns the gaze from another position/character’s point of view, the viewer is sutured to the cisgender (usually male) gaze. However, when the shot/reverse shot is shared between characters who refuse the cisgender gaze, the inevitability and dominance of the male/female and hetero/homo binaries in narrative cinema are brought into question (Halberstam 2005: 86).

Likewise, *Predestination* makes use of doubling and ghosting techniques as the character the protagonist most frequently interacts with throughout the narrative is their younger and older selves, including tape recordings made by the older Time Agent to instruct his younger self as a new recruit. The film also uses camera techniques like shot/reverse shot to suture the audience into the protagonist’s point of view when young John shares his remarkable transition story with the Barkeep/Time Agent, when John meets Jane and falls in love, and when the Time Agent confronts the Fizzle Bomber. However, the audience is not *aware* of these techniques throughout most of the film, believing instead that Jane, John, the Time Agent, and Fizzle Bomber are separate people. It is only near the end, when viewers become fully aware of the protagonist’s complicated singular identity, that viewers realize the full extent of doubling and ghosting in the narrative. As a result, the epistemological uncertainty introduced by the time-traveling protagonist’s intersexuality and transgenderism queers the looking *itself*. Heteronormative gender and sexuality are disrupted, giving viewers access to a transgender gaze that refuses binary cisgender assumptions about identity and desire.

Thematically, Halberstam says trans characters in films like *By Hook or By Crook* (2001) can “create a closed world of queerness that is locked in place by the circuit of a gaze that never references the male or the female gaze as such” (2005: 79). Likewise, *Predestination* creates a “closed world of queerness” through the circuit of a gaze created by the transgender, intersex protagonist’s interaction with and desire for themselves across their own timeline. So while the Spirig brothers may not have intended to make a queer film, I argue that the effect of its science fictional transgender gaze is decidedly queer: viewer identification with the non-normative protagonist, coupled with the estranging effect of their complicated timeline, work to disrupt and destabilize the mainstream viewer’s own epistemological and ontological stability as a (cis)gendered, heteronormative subject.



In classic Hollywood films, the viewer is sutured to the cisgender (usually male) gaze when the camera looks from one position/character's point of view then returns the gaze from another position/character's point of view. However, when the shot/reverse shot is shared between John and the Time Agent, or the Time Agent and Fizzle Bomber, the cinematic grammar of shot/reverse shot forces spectators into adopting the gaze of a trans character long before audiences realize that they are really the same trans man at different points in their own timeline.



The cinematic technique of “ghosting” through photographs, audio recordings, home movies, and the like allows an absent trans character to haunt visual and narrative spaces and to defy the boundaries of past, present, and future. *Predestination* makes use of the ghosting technique through tape recordings, often heard as voiceovers, made by the older Time Agent to instruct his younger self as a new recruit.

This queering of mainstream viewer spectatorship is not uncommon. Alexander Doty, in his key work on queerness in mass culture reception practices, recognizes how queer erotics already reside within culture's erotic heart, both as a necessary means of distinguishing normative “straight” sexuality from non-normative desires and as “a position that can be and is occupied in various ways by otherwise heterosexual and straight-identifying people” (1993: 3-4). Films like *Gentlemen Prefer Blonds* (Hawks 1953) and *Trapeze* (Reed 1956) that are “ostensibly addressed to straight audiences [...] often have greater potential for encouraging a wider range of queer responses” than films that are addressed primarily to lesbian and gay audiences (Doty 1993: 8). As such, Doty proposes that “basically heterocentrist texts can contain queer elements, and basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments.” Moreover, he says, rather than explaining away these moments, people “should be encouraged to examine and express these moments as queer” (1993: 3, emphasis in original).

Doty's analysis of queer erotics in mass culture brings me to the heart of my reading. By eliciting viewer empathy and identification with the protagonist—one who embodies both genders, desires queerly, and ruptures how time works to organize bodies in what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) terms “chrononormative” ways—the film's generic and cinematic effects blur the mutually-exclusive epistemological categories of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. In order to resolve the film's visible and temporal and paradoxes, its mainstream cisgender, heteronormative audience members are forced to confront any fixed assumptions about gender and sexuality. As a result, *Predestination*'s many paradoxes work to expose binary gender and sexual knowledge frameworks as illusion and to reveal the contingent nature of subjectivity.

The theorizing of sociologist Erving Goffman and post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler can help to explain how the film may achieve these results. Goffman argues that statements do not have intrinsic meanings, but only acquire meaning in the process of interaction, interpretation, and contextualization. What emerges from those processes are “social frameworks” that “provide meaning, determine what is relevant and irrelevant when considering certain actors, issues or events, and suggest appropriate behavior” (cited in Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011, p. 103).

Expanding on Goffman's work, Butler (2009) deconstructs social frameworks on an epistemological level by critically examining how they guide the interpretation of a social scene through norms. She states that recognition of another in a social scene is made possible through normative frameworks of intelligibility established within domains of the knowable. These normative frameworks must be present for bodies to be recognizable as male or female, as heterosexual or homosexual, or for one to be recognized as human at all. To understand how this works, Butler draws upon the frame of *recognition*, understood in Hegelian terms as a reciprocal action undertaken by at least two subjects in a scene of address. This frame of recognition—i.e. the hailing of another as a particular subject, and the acknowledgement of the other as that subject—is necessary in order to comprehend *recognizability*, or the general conditions that shape a living being into a recognizable subject (Butler 2009, pp. 4-9).

In *Predestination*, the mainstream viewer's normative frames of gender recognition, which underlie their initial assumptions about the gender and sexual identity of characters, are repeatedly upended by a transgender gaze formed by the intersex protagonist and their complex interactions with themselves through time. In the next section, I closely read several sequences in the film to analyze how the generic features and cinematic techniques I've discussed work in the film

to queer the binary epistemological frameworks of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual—i.e. make them peculiar, seem bizarre, and spoil their effectiveness as categories—and thereby disrupt what audiences think they “know” about gender and sexuality.

Perception and paradox in *Predestination*



When the Time Agent attempts to disarm a bomb in the opening sequence of the film, it blows up in his face causing horrible, disfiguring burns.



A doctor warns the Time Agent that his appearance and voice will be different after extensive facial reconstruction surgery. When the bandages are removed, he says, “I’ve changed so much, I doubt my own mother would recognize me,” and laughs at the irony.

While I’ve used certain characteristics of science fiction and the transgender look to closely read some of the film’s elements, the best way to unravel its full effect on viewer perception is to analyze its structure as mainstream viewers actually experience it—from the beginning to the end, in all its looping turns.

In the opening of the first act, set in the subbasement of an anonymous building, we witness the shadowy Fizzle Bomber attempt to set off an explosive device only to be stopped by the Time Agent. No faces can be seen in the murky setting—just vaguely male shapes in quick motion as they fight. The Time Agent prevails and attempts to disarm the bomb, but it explodes in his face causing horrible, disfiguring burns. As he struggles to crawl toward the violin case containing his time machine, a third figure enters the scene, slowly walks to the case, and shoves it toward the wounded Agent, who spins the dials and disappears to the Temporal Agency Headquarters in the 1990s.

After performing facial reconstruction surgery on the Agent, a doctor warns him that his appearance and voice will be different. When the bandages are removed, we recognize actor Ethan Hawke for the first time. Looking in a mirror, he says, “I’ve changed so much, I doubt my own mother would recognize me,” and laughs. At this point, viewers have no idea why he finds this thought amusing, but later it will make sense. The directors have left puzzle clues throughout the film that, when pieced together, reveal that the three vaguely male figures in the opening scene are all one-and-the-same time traveler.

From the outset, the film’s presumptive cisgender, heteronormative viewers bring their own privileged binary gender identities and frames of reference to the narrative, prompting assumptions about the story’s conflict and initial point-of-view character—the Time Agent. Sent back in time on his final mission, the Agent (Hawke) poses as a Barkeep at Pop’s Place in 1970 New York City. As the scene opens, a young man, played by Snook, enters the basement dive bar as rough-looking men watch him suspiciously. “Look at this freak,” one patron says. Ignoring the comment, the young man sits on a barstool and orders a shot of whisky. After serving him, the Barkeep asks, “So, come here often?”

“What are you, a faggot?” he snaps back.

“Not funny, man,” the Barkeep replies. Interestingly, Hawke’s delivery here seems less a denial of homosexuality than a rejection of the young man’s homophobic labeling.

In a gesture toward apology, the young man asks the Barkeep to tell him something that is funny. He tries to beg off, saying that he can’t tell jokes. After some very bad attempts, he says, “Which comes first, chicken or egg? Ever think about that?” To which the young man replies, “The rooster.”





John comes into Pop's Place, where the Time Agent posing as a Barkeep waits to begin his final mission. The Time Agent's watch, which displays the local Time Zone, provides a device for establishing when a scene takes place.



When the Barkeep asks John what he does for a living, he reveals he writes confession stories under the penname "The Unwed Mother." The barkeep builds rapport with his younger self by revealing that he reads his work for insight into the female mind.

This opening exchange is just one of many hints that the film uses to foreshadow the intersex protagonist and their story. For example, as the two men chat at the bar, in the background a television news anchor reports a city in fear of the Fizzle Bomber, shifting their conversation to the unknown bomber's identity. Later on, when young John is about to embark on his first time-travel experience with the Time Agent, the jukebox plays the folksy 1947 novelty song, "I'm My Own Granpaw."



News coverage on the bar's television establishes the Fizzle Bomber as a major threat to the city. Picking up the topic in his conversation with the Barkeep, John reveals his underlying misanthropy, saying that sometimes people "get what they deserve."

The film uses many hints to foreshadow the intersex trans protagonist and their story, including folksy 1947 novelty song, "I'm My Own Granpaw."

While these hints set the stage for later revelations, the first real challenge to a mainstream viewer's frame of gender recognition comes when the young man begins telling his life story. As it turns out, The Unwed Mother's "trick" for achieving the authentic "women's angle" in his confessional stories is that John was once Jane. As Halberstam notes, in mainstream transgender films the trans character often is presented at first as "passing" as male or female, just as John passes as a young cisgendered man. The narrative climax of these films usually centers upon exposure of the trans character *as transgendered*, prompting the "rewind look" where viewers literally must rewind the linear narrative in their minds or through a flashback montage sequence so they can make sense of the film's narrative logic in terms of gender passing (Halberstam 2005: 77-78). In contrast, with the words, "When I was a little girl," *Predestination* reveals John's identity as a trans man early in the first act *before* we know anything about his history. While mainstream audiences start this scene seeing two cisgendered males chatting in a bar, their heteronormative perceptions must transform to



The Barkeep looks up in surprise when John reveals his identity as a trans man early in the film. By defamiliarizing John's gender identity in the first act, *Predestination* has begun the process of queering audience perception.

seeing a *cis man* (Hawke) talking with a *trans man* (Snook) in order to make sense of earlier comments and later narrative developments. This is just the first of several disorienting shifts in gender recognition for mainstream viewers. By defamiliarizing John's gendered subjectivity in the first act, the film has begun the process of queering audience perception.

This disorientation continues as John tells the story of his childhood and adolescent years in an orphanage, which the audience experiences through flashback sequences in the second act. In these flashbacks, the point of view shifts again to that of a girl and young woman, adding another layer of disorientation for mainstream viewers who see the world through the eyes of Jane while hearing John's deeper voice and masculine diction in the first-person voiceover narration. As a girl, Jane knew that she was somehow different from other children in her orphanage. She was tough, but not pretty, so she learned how to fight both girls and boys. She was intelligent, but sex confused her. When she got older, Jane vowed that any child of hers would have a mom and dad, which kept her "pure." "No orphanage for my kid," John says in voiceover.

Just before she turns eighteen, a man—Mr. Robertson, played by Noah Taylor—visits the orphanage to recruit young, unattached women for government service in the "progressive" SpaceCorp. John's voiceover explains that NASA had figured out they couldn't send men into space for long periods of time without a way of "relieving the pressure." The government was looking for "pure" women who could "speak the same language" as the spacers, and if they were successful, they would probably marry an astronaut at the end of their enlistment.



Jane appeared to be a healthy baby girl so she never had a thorough medical examination. However, growing up she didn't feel like other girls and didn't like her appearance, so she stopped looking in mirrors.



Mr. Robertson recruits Jane from the orphanage for government service in the "progressive" SpaceCorp.



While the government wants to enlist women into SpaceCorp who are physically and intellectually superior, it becomes clear in her initial interview that recruits are valued more for their appearance than their minds. When Jane is asked if she understands the purpose of the SpaceCorp—namely, "relieving the pressure" for men on long missions—she replies that it doesn't matter so long as she gets to go to space.



Jane excels at her SpaceCorp training. However, when she fights with another recruit and receives a more thorough medical exam, Jane is disqualified from the program for reasons she doesn't fully understand until later.

Jane joins the Corp and excels at all the physical and intellectual challenges of the training. But it's clear that, despite the program's "progressive" approach, 1960s sexism prevails and women in the Corp are valued for their attractiveness more than their minds. During Jane's interview with a panel of scientists and astronauts, she is asked to take off her glasses so the men can judge her appearance better. She is asked, "You aren't one of those women's lib types, are you?" And, "You do understand what this job requires of you?" Jane replies that it doesn't matter so long as she gets to go to space.

Jane's dream ends, however, when she gets into a fistfight with another trainee. She goes through a more thorough medical examination, the results of which disqualify her from the program. This is the first time a medical professional recognizes something about Jane that makes her different from other girls, like she is "living in someone else's body," as she reveals in her psychological evaluation. Mr. Robertson breaks the news that Jane can't continue the training but doesn't explain why, letting her believe that the fight was the cause.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Jane takes work as a “mother’s helper” and begins reading women’s confession stories to distract herself.

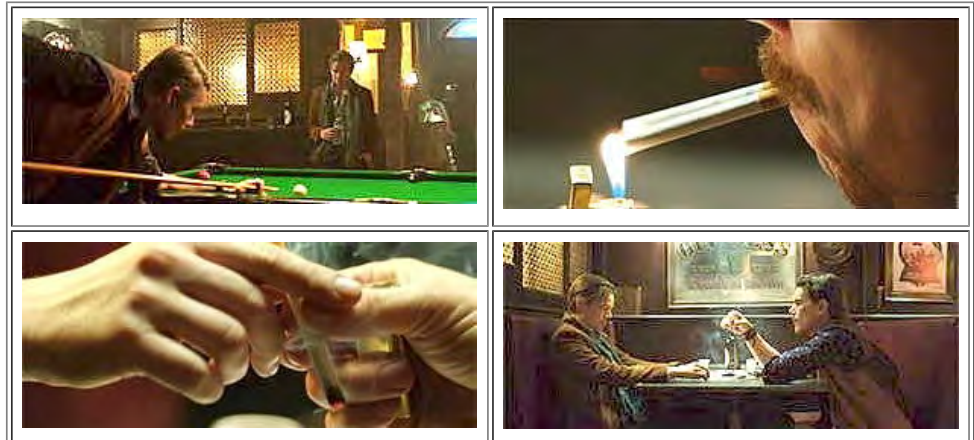
While Jane’s story is told in flashbacks, the film returns periodically to young John and the Barkeep in Pop’s Place. As John tells his story, we first see the two men at the bar, then playing pool together, then sitting in a booth across from each other drinking whisky. As the Barkeep questions John about his experiences, the older man lights two cigarettes and hands one to the young trans man, a familiar and intimate gesture that John accepts without comment.

These quiet moments of intimacy between the two men are important for building viewer identification with the person they see as the story’s protagonist—be it young John or the older Barkeep/Agent. For instance, in the shot/reverse shot structure of the booth scene, the viewer is sutured into the narrative viewpoint of the character with whom they most identify. In a series of back and forth shots, John asks the Barkeep, “Have you ever done something stupid for love?”

“Once,” he replies.

“So you understand.”

“I do,” says the Barkeep.

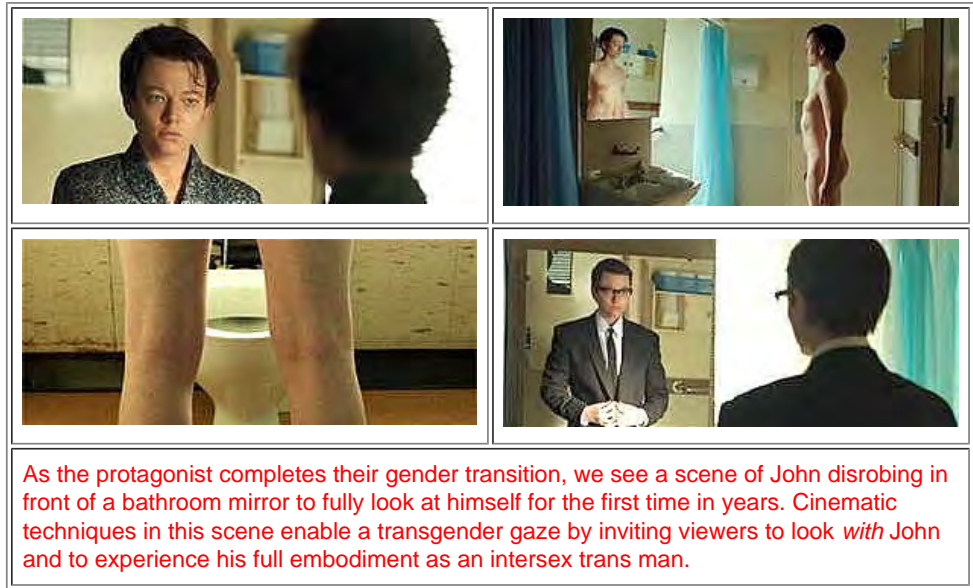


Flashback sequences telling Jane’s story are interwoven with scenes of John and the Barkeep drinking whisky, playing pool, and smoking cigarettes. These quiet moments of intimacy between the two men are important for building viewer identification with the person they see as the story’s protagonist—be it young John or the older Barkeep.

Viewers may reasonably assume that one of these two characters must be the focal point of the “stupid thing” and wonder how the other character will figure into that story. Later on, when viewers begin to piece together who the Barkeep/Agent actually is, they must “rewind” this scene to understand the deeper implications of this empathetic moment between the two men. As such, assumptions viewers make about the protagonist’s identity during the second act set up dramatic shifts in audience perception in the third act.

At the end of the long flashback sequence, as the protagonist completes their gender transition, we see a scene of John disrobing in front of a bathroom mirror to fully look at himself for the first time in years. The mirror shots in this scene double the gaze and allow viewers look *with* John at his new body. Short-cropped hair, flat chest, flaccid penis, red scars from hysterectomy and breast-reduction surgeries—attention shifts between embodied and reflected images that signify

trans masculinity. As the camera shifts to a low-angle shot of the toilet, John steps over, lifts the lid, and pees standing up. Gender signifiers in this flashback signal another shift in perspective for audiences—the intersex protagonist’s physical transformation from woman to trans man.



Sitting across from the Barkeep, John says his new appearance reminded him of “the bastard who ruined my life,” though the nurses thought he was “handsome.” These references to the intersex protagonist’s sexuality subtly remind viewers that their gender transition complicates heterosexual norms through Jane/John’s desirability by *both* genders. The Barkeep replies that John seems normal enough. “More normal than ever,” he responds since he has just learned from his doctor that he’s a “fully fertile male specimen.”



Near the conclusion of his narrative, John tells the Barkeep that he has just learned that he’s a “fully fertile male specimen.” The Barkeep shakes his hand: “Welcome to the tribe.” Later on, when viewers begin to piece together who the Barkeep/Agent actually is, they must “rewind” scenes like this one to understand the deeper implications of this empathetic moment between the two men. As such, assumptions viewers make about the protagonist’s identity during the second act set up dramatic shifts in audience perception in the third act.

“Welcome to the tribe,” the Barkeep says, shaking his hand.


As John wraps up his story, the Barkeep asks him what he wants now—love? John replies, “Fuck love, I want a purpose.” He discovers both when the Barkeep reveals that he is more than what he seems: “What if I could put him in front of you, the man who ruined your life, and you could get away with it—would you kill him?” The Barkeep/Time Agent strikes a bargain with John: he delivers John to the man, John does what he likes to him, and afterward he trains to become an Agent.

As the third act begins, John gets a crash course in time travel when the Agent takes him back to April of 1963—back to the place where Jane first met the man who had loved and abandoned her. The Agent gives him clothes, money, and a gun along with a whirlwind of instructions.

“Do I have a choice?” John asks.

“You always have a choice,” the Agent replies, “though I’m starting to think that some things might be inevitable.”



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| <p>from the bar back to April of 1963—back to the place where John first met the man who had loved and abandoned him. The Agent made a bargain: he delivers John to the man who ruined his life, John does what he likes to him, and afterward he trains to become an Agent.</p> | |
|  | <p>Back on the college campus where he once took charm lessons, John searches for the man he remembers, only to accidentally bump into a girl—Jane.</p> |

Back on the college campus where he once took charm lessons, John searches for the man he remembers, only to accidentally bump into a girl, scattering her books. Distracted, he helps her to gather her things, and the girl says, “You know what they say....” John absently finishes the aphorism for her, then looks up in sudden recollection.



At this moment viewer perceptions shift *yet again* when we realize, *déjà vu* fashion, that we’ve experienced this moment before, only from Jane’s point of view. John stares, stunned, at himself as a young woman and finally gets it—he *is* the man who ruined his life. In the disorientation of seeing Jane and John chronologically out of order in the same time zone, viewers must confront their assumptions about what they think they know about the character, just as John must in that moment.



John’s unexpected confrontation with his past self once again disrupts the cisgender gaze, disorienting viewers and upending their assumptions about the “man” who ruined Jane/John’s life. In that *déjà vu* moment, John and viewers alike are reoriented to the past as he relives that first encounter from a new perspective, which reframes both Jane’s future and John’s past.

“You’re beautiful,” he tells her. “Someone should have told you that.”

As noted earlier, trans films confront the temporal and visible paradoxes that constitute transgenderism (Halberstam 2005: 77). This dynamic is literalized in *Predestination* with the doubling of Jane/John—the same person both temporally dislocated through time travel and visibly transformed by gender reassignment. Yet it is not the character of Jane/John *per se* that is paradoxical; rather it is the audience’s *perception* of the character that constitutes the paradox. Through the long, linear flashback story of his life as a girl and involuntary transition, the audience comes to accept John’s gender presentation as “properly” male. Now, John’s unexpected confrontation with Jane once again disrupts the cisgender gaze, disorienting viewers and upending their assumptions about the “man” who ruined Jane/John’s life. In that *déjà vu* moment, John and viewers alike are reoriented to the past as he relives that first encounter from a new perspective, which reframes both Jane’s future and John’s past.

Moreover, the doubling of Jane/John and suturing of viewers into their point of view in this and subsequent scenes transports already disoriented mainstream audiences into a transgender look that rejects both the cisgender gaze and heterosexual norms. Halberstam notes that the film grammar of shot/reverse shot “allows the viewers to insert themselves into the filmic world by imagining that their access to the characters is unmediated” (2005: 86). By participating in a transgender look that dismantles the cisgender gaze, the “inevitability and



In time-travel scenes, the doubling of Jane/John and suturing of spectators into their point of view transports already disoriented mainstream viewers into a transgender look that rejects both the cisgender gaze and heterosexual norms. Through the doubled protagonist, viewers experience the queerness of their own looking through new knowledge of the protagonist that ruptures normative gender and sexual expectations.



dominance of both the male/female and hetero/homo binary in narrative cinema” are brought into question for viewers (Halberstam 2005: 86). And since Jane/John *is* the protagonist, viewers experience the queerness of their own looking through new knowledge that ruptures normative gender and sexual frameworks. As John and Jane go out together, fall in love, and have sex, heterosexuality itself is queered for viewers through the ambiguous, bisexual nature of the protagonist’s incestuously masturbatory sex act.

Meanwhile, the Time Agent (Hawke) departs on his own mission, and viewers experience another déjà vu when he appears in the subbasement of the anonymous building from the film’s opening sequence. The Agent ambushes the unidentifiable Fizzle Bomber, hoping to stop him before any damage is done. The two men fight viciously, each an equal match for the other, but the Bomber prevails and knocks out the Agent. He recovers too late to stop the bomb from exploding in the face of another Agent—only in yet another disorienting moment viewers realize, as the opening scene repeats itself from a different vantage point, that the older Agent who was knocked out and the younger Agent injured in the explosion are, again, one-and-the-same person—John. His severe facial burns required reconstructive surgeries that changed both his appearance and voice to the extent that, looking in a mirror, he had said, “My own mother wouldn’t recognize me,” and laughed. Viewers are now positioned to understand the joke.

At times during the film, often as the Agent pursues his final Temporal Agency mission, the audience hears another voiceover of the Agent (Hawke) talking about what he’s learned about time travel—how it feels to time jump, how to handle yourself in a different time zone, and the dangers of psychosis from jumping more often than allowed. In early scenes, we see him talking into a mini-cassette tape recorder and, later on, realize that the narrative voiceover we hear during his mission scenes is from these recordings, though it’s unclear at first for whom the tapes are being made. These audio recordings provide another technique for refusing the cisgender gaze and allowing the viewer to access a transgender look. Much like the “ghosting” Halberstam discusses, where photos or recordings of a trans character allow them to inhabit spaces when they are not present (2005: 78), these audio recordings literalize the doubling of the protagonist and their communication with themselves across time.

As already noted, the science fictional device of time travel works alongside cinematic techniques to queer viewer perceptions and upend their frames of recognition. As the Time Agent’s final mission winds down, he returns to 1963 to retrieve John from a park after he has met and fallen in love with his younger, female self. John agreed to join the Temporal Agency so he could face the man who ruined his life. Now he faces the older Agent, pulling the gun from his coat pocket. “You sick sonofabitch,” he says. But the Agent is calm and reassures John that events are unfolding in the correct order: “You understand who she is, and who you are, now maybe you are ready to understand who I am.”

The intersex protagonist is tripled in this scene as the Agent and John look across the park at Jane waiting calmly on a distant bench. Again, mainstream viewers must reorient themselves to the film’s past, present, and future as they realize that John and the older Time Agent are the same person. With access to a transgender look that refuses a cisgender gaze and upends normative frames of recognition, viewers at last recognize that *both* men are transgender and that the story of John’s life as an intersex person is the Agent’s own story. Gazing at Jane in the distance, John admits, “I don’t want to leave her.” “You’re not,” the Agent replies.



The science fictional convention of time travel also works to queer viewer perceptions. When the Agent returns to 1963 to retrieve John after he has met and fallen in love with Jane, John accuses the Agent of being the man who ruined his life. But the Agent is calm and reassures the younger man that events are unfolding in the correct order: “You understand who she is, and who you are, now maybe you are ready to understand who I am.” With access to a transgender look that refuses a cisgender gaze, viewers at last recognize that *both* men are transgender and that the story of John’s life as an intersex person is the Agent’s own story.

“I never wanted to hurt her,” says the younger man, and his older self answers sympathetically, “I know, and now she knows too.”

Conclusion: looking beyond representation

Halberstam introduced the concept of the transgender look at a time when trans representation in mainstream film and television—when it appeared at all—tended to reinforce negative cultural stereotypes and assumptions. By 2005, when *In a Queer Time and Place* was published, only five films had portrayed trans men in significant roles and fewer than forty films had portrayed trans women, starting with director Ed Wood’s unauthorized 1953 retelling of Christine Jorgenson’s story, *Glen or Glenda* (Anon. 2019).

Since 2005, film and television producers have responded to the LGBTQ+ community’s demand for more and better representations of non-normative and non-binary gender and sexual identities. Around this time, GLAAD Media Institute, an organization working to ensure inclusive, diverse, and accurate portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community, also began compiling statistics on representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters on television. For the 2006-2010 seasons, the numbers of regular and reoccurring trans characters fluctuated between zero and two on broadcast and cable networks (GLAAD 2011: 16). A decade later, GLAAD counted a total of 38 trans characters across broadcast, cable, and streaming programs for the 2019-20 season: 21 trans women, 12 trans men, and five non-binary characters, all of whom also represent a range of ethnic identities and sexual orientations (2019: 28). These characters represent 8 percent of the total 488 regular and reoccurring LGBTQ+ characters on scripted broadcast, cable, and streaming programs that year (GLAAD 2019: 28). In addition, in the last five years there have been five trans men and 11 trans women portrayed in significant film roles (Anon. 2019).

With films like *The Danish Girl* (Hooper 2015) and *Girl* (Dhont 2018) and popular scripted shows like *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan 2013-19) and *Transparent* (Soloway 2014-19), transgender portrayals are on the rise. But while more trans actors, directors, writers, and producers are involved in these projects, cisgender actors are still cast in trans roles and trans portrayals may still stereotype and misrepresent trans lives. *Predestination* is no exception to these criticisms. As Schenkel explains, the film resorts to sexist stereotypes when establishing differences between Jane and other cisgender girls in the orphanage as well as cisgender women in SpaceCorp, thus reinforcing damaging feminine and masculine stereotypes (2015: 56).

Moreover, Schenkel rightly condemns the depiction of Jane/John’s transition both for the film’s overly medicalized and sexualized focus (e.g. shots of their penis and cesarean and breast reduction scars), as well as for the story’s conflation of intersex and transgender identities (2015: 58). While an intersex person has physical variations that interfere with their sex classification as male or female, a transgender person does not identify as the gender they were assigned at birth. And while there may be overlap between the two, not all intersex people are transgender and vice versa. *Predestination* treats the two as indistinguishable and thus “conflates two socially, physically, and psychologically different experiences” (Schenkel 2015: 58). So while the film’s “straight, white, male directors” didn’t set out to make a queer film, or to present a political message about trans or intersex experience, Schenkel says, the fictional events still play into real, contemporary societal issues and so inevitably comment on them: “[B]y not approaching it as an issues film—with attendant research to avoid

inadvertent harm to already stigmatised groups—*Predestination*'s makers have reinforced limiting representations and negative stereotypes that trans and intersex activists have been fighting against [for] years" (2015: 61-62).

While from a critical perspective the film's gender representation may convey an unproductive political message, my contention here has been that *Predestination*'s intersex protagonist, time-travel structure, and cinematic techniques all interact to queer frames of recognition for mainstream viewers, and thus the film performs a different kind of productive political work. By deploying a transgender look in the protagonist's interactions with themselves at different moments in their own timeline, the film disrupts—again and again—the heteronormative assumptions and identifications of a privileged cisgender viewing audience. As such, the film's narrative and cinematic structure works to dismantle the contemporary Western binary epistemology we rely on to "know" and understand gender and sexual identity of another.

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Notes

1. When referencing the film's protagonist in a scene, I will refer to them using the gender with which they identify at that point in time. When referencing the protagonist generally, however, I will use gender-neutral they/their/them pronouns. [[return to page 1](#)]

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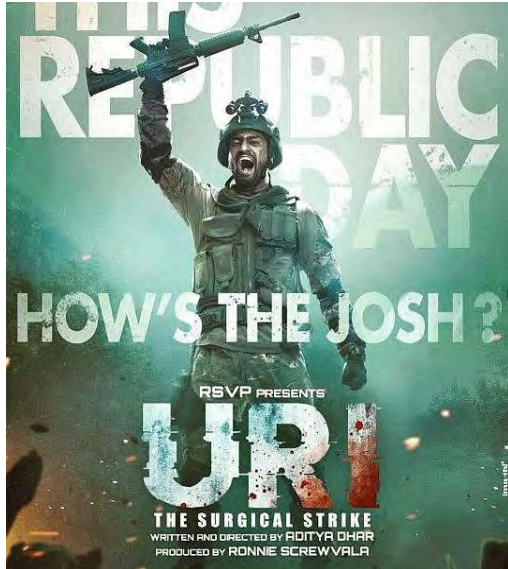
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



A special poster of *Uri: The Surgical Strike* featuring the iconic line from the film. This poster is advertising for the Republic Day weekend that honors the day when the Constitution of India came into effect. Since it is a national holiday, films that are in the theatres on Republic Day tend to be high-grossers.



The 1996 Miss World Pageant was vehemently opposed by the right-wing Bharatiya Janta Party and leftist political parties. This is a caricature of popular Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan wearing a swimsuit. Bachchan's company was organizing the pageant in Bangalore.

Male subjectivity in New India: *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017) and *Pad Man* (2018)

by [Ananya](#)

Gendering New India: neoliberalism, anxiety and muscularity

Based on the contentious surgical strike that India carried out in Pakistan in response to the 2016 Uri attacks,[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) the war film *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (Aditya Dhar, 2019) unsurprisingly made a strong impression on audiences and the government alike. Defense minister Nirmala Sitharaman joined a screening of the film where she addressed the audience comprised of army veterans with a popular line from the film “*How’s the Josh!*” (How’s the energy!). At the inauguration of the National Museum of Indian Cinema, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the audience with the same line. When India carried out air strikes in Pakistan in response to the Pulwama attacks,[2] several lines from the film circulated widely on social media celebrating “Surgical Strike 2.0”: “*Yeh Hindustan ab chup nahi rahega. Yeh Naya Hindustan hai. Yeh ghar me ghusega bhi aur marega bhi.*” (India will no longer be silent. This is New India. It will enter the enemy’s home and attack.) The declaration of a “Naya Hindustan” (New India) with a foundational value in virility and penetrative muscle alludes to a force of intense transformation. With the abrogation of Article 370 and the totalizing occupation of Kashmir, the state literally redefined the nation’s territorial borders.[3] In this essay, I consider the field where this forceful transformation takes place and the contending elements that battle for the nation’s makeover by studying two contemporary films, *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (Shree Narayan Singh, 2017) and *Pad Man* (R. Balakrishnan, 2018).

The current, profoundly altered nationhood looks back to the 1991 reforms that ushered in a neoliberal economic order. Rupal Oza argues that the nation’s intensified re-alignment with global capital then had to reconcile its concomitant loss of actual sovereignty through increased control over the domain of national culture and identity. The consequence was that a set of rigid gendered and sexual codes were judiciously endorsed as belonging to the nation (Oza 2006). Oza demonstrates how the peculiar interaction between economic reform and the rise of the Hindu right dialectically consolidated the upper caste, consumerist middle-class identity and power. Heightened globalization has stimulated people’s growing anxieties because of their perceived loss of a formerly guarded, stable sense of place and identity. By mobilizing representational practices that re-codify a particular system of gendered identity and belonging, the nation has attempted to reinforce its sovereignty against globalization.

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| <p>While the BJP argued that the event was incompatible with 'indigenous', Hindu culture because of its Westernized decadence and corrupting influences on women, the left argued that the event was symbolic of encroaching capitalist globalization and opposed the commodification of women by multinational corporations.</p> | <p>A Hindu Priest protesting the pageant argues that women in the United States have sex at an early age and this is vulgar and incompatible with superior 'Indian' values.</p> |

Oza then examines three sites where this arbitration takes place—protests against the 1996 Miss World Pageant, reactions to the 1998 Nuclear Tests, and demands for censorship with the introduction of satellite television. These protests all reject global intrusion into the private sphere of the home. Oza asks,

‘To what extent does the ‘protection of women’ discourse and the demonstration of virility tap into sentiments of postcolonial defiance of imperial power while simultaneously solidifying normative prescriptions of gender and sexuality? (Oza 10)”

Colonial historiography and orientalist discourse framed Hindus in a double identity. On the one hand, Hindus were inheritors of a glorious past that was destroyed by barbaric Muslim rule. On the other hand, they were colonial subjects who had to be ruled over by the British Raj to initiate a return to their *own* rich and ancient past. In reaction, since Indian nationalists could not battle the colonial masters in the realm of the material/public domain, they glorified their superiority in the spiritual/private domain (Chatterjee 1993). Nationalist discourse had to elaborate a distinctive spatial politics to locate women’s bodies within the private sphere of the home and women’s subjectivities as intrinsically suited to preserving values of “Indian” culture. At the same time, such discourse prescribed that Indian modernity’s investment in science and technology proceed cautiously in order to prevent transgressing into a vulgar Western modernity.

Interestingly, in relation to this older nationalist discourse, in an epic text like the film *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) the contradictions of Indian modernity, with a distinctively Nehruvian imagination, are negotiated on the terrain of female sexuality. Moinak Biswas notes that *Mother India* represents the moment that marks the arrival of India as a state as one fraught with spatial disunity (Biswas 1995). That is, the mythical, self-enclosed village enters historical time by marking this shift from the local to the communal. Thus *Mother India* opens with a mute Radha[4] observing a landscape filled with machines and alien technology. The previously timeless village is moving towards an advanced mode of production under the eyes of the newly independent nation-state. Biswas writes how this moment of stillness and disunity is “an acknowledgement of the essential pain, the enormous upheaval of the moment where a society decides to embrace a



A set of protestors contrast the conditions of real Indian women who are harassed and assaulted against the illusory profligacy of the pageant. The protestors urge the government to pay attention and resources towards the protection of Indian women as opposed to the protection of the pageant (Oza notes how the left opposed the government providing police security to what was essentially a corporate event).



Radha embraces the soil as 'alien' technology tills the land behind her.



As the Mother of the village (and nation), Radha inaugurates the dam and welcomes the postcolonial, Nehruvian state's modernizing intervention.

form rather than produce it" (Biswas 11). The land that has been shaped by Radha's blood and sweat, her manual labor will now be controlled through technology foreign and alien to the timeless village. In adapting elements that do not belong organically to the community, the village goes through a violent negotiation in its transition from myth to history. To do this, the newly independent nation state and the long-standing feudal order must negotiate the contradictions of a coalition between two contending modes of production. Within the film's script, contradictions become resolved in ambivalent fashion only through the Mother figure, who can simultaneously inaugurate the dam and preserve feudal honor.

Oza notes that the British Raj offered a justification of colonial rule through mobilizing Western science and rationality in a peculiar fashion. The Raj carefully mediated categories of "tradition" and "modernity" by ascribing its oppositional status to the colonial subject's "traditional" values. The Raj thus stated its rejection of any investment in irrational and superstitious practices.

Writing in reference to the 1998 Nuclear Tests, Oza discusses how the "bomb acts as a 'totem,' a sacred object with magical power to restore that which is ailing among the faithful (...) an artifact that will enable restoration of strength, virility, and impotence" (Oza 125). Furthermore, Oza uses the term "fetishized sovereignty" to describe this magnificent exhibition of militarized power and control that masks the actual loss of economic and political sovereignty. She explains "the act of fetishizing as a process by which the conditions of political reality are concealed from scrutiny" (Oza 124). Under the backdrop of weakened national sovereignty and political instability, the tests indicate a sense of achievement now stated in terms of renewed virility, especially important since this is a moment that is also associated with the painful memory of colonial emasculation. The nation visibly demonstrates how it can protect its territorial borders by building its *own* technology. Furthermore, for the new upwardly mobile, consuming middle classes, the Tests represent triumph on the global stage, "catching up" with the rest of the world. Yet, there remained the same cautious need to distinguish Indian modernity from crude, materialist form of Western modernity; this kind of thinking still prevailed through claims for an indigenous "Vedic" science.

Describing the contemporary situation of India's entry into multinational neoliberal modernity, Sanjay Srivastava examines how the use of new media technologies during the 2014 elections built a public representation of Narendra Modi that valorized a specific muscular leadership style, generating a distinctive masculinist discourse in agreement with an acclimatized environment of consumerist modernity (Srivastava 2015). The discourse of colonial masculinity had designated natives as either effeminate and incompetent, or as militant martial races who lack intellectual capability. In a parallel way, in the 2014 elections, former Congress Party Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was framed as the impotent, feminized authority incapable of securing the nation from external (Pakistan and China) or internal threats (Muslim terrorists). On the other hand, Modi's prudently mediated image has valorized a representation of a virile, potent masculinity that can navigate a postindustrial space. "Modi-masculinity" fosters a model of "moral consumption," which unites not only India as a nation inhabited by the burgeoning middle classes but also the de-territorialized, global Indian diaspora, Srivastava explains this kind of post-nationalism as

"the articulation of the nationalist emotion with the robust desires engendered through new practices of consumerism and their associated cultures of privatization and individuation. It indexes a situation where it is no longer considered a betrayal of the dreams of nation-building to either base individual subjectivity within an ethic of



In *Salaakhen* (1998), Vishal Agnihotri is enraged when he is acquitted of the crimes he has committed because of the cunning tricks of his corrupt defence lawyer. In the film, Vishal kills a set of men responsible for a woman's rape and murder and his father's suicide. Later, he urges the lawyer who got these criminals acquitted to defend him. Through this act, he practically demonstrates the incompetency of the legal system since the court continually seems to acquit criminals.



Vishal literally breaks the shackles of the court to attack the villainous lawyer.



The impotent state is incapacitated and cannot restrain his body from delivering a forceful form of vigilante justice.



Vishal tells the judge that he has no right to offer his judgements because he cannot distinguish between truth and lies. He argues that court is merely a theatre where people are entertained and reject's the legal system's capability to deliver any form of justice.

consumption (as opposed to savings) or to think of the state's statism in a context of co-operation with private capital." (Srivastava 335)

Furthermore, the ethics of moral consumption re-align older social roles with individuated consumer desire; in this way, a new nationalism can foster and draw upon "the new forms of subjectivities (e.g., individualism) within existing social structures" (Srivastava 335). Modi-masculinity can undo the nation's historical emasculation and soothe contemporary masculine anxiety directed at female consumption. Srivastava notes how this vision of masculinity is aligned with the categories of the post-national and of moral consumption. Such masculinity potentially inspires "an individualized subject who is encouraged to make (his) own enterprise, though not exactly as he pleases but, rather, through the dictates of social structures, such as family and kin networks." (Srivastava 336)

Here I analyze how two films that exemplify Modi-masculinity's prescription of a new male subjectivity for the consumer-citizen-subject—*Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* and *Pad Man*. The films appropriate the affective space engendered by a vernacular masculinity that was deeply entrenched in the spatial politics of provincial, small town North India. That vernacular masculinity had been seen in films like *Dabangg* (Abhinav Kashyap, 2010), *Ishaqzaade* (Habib Faisal, 2012), *Gangs of Wasseyapur* (Anurag Kashyap, 2012), and more (Sinha 2013) [5]. The films I am discussing shift the focus by constructing a virile, competent male body that personifies a transformed Indian nationhood. In these films, I find the return of a peculiar form of the feudal family romance. That is, the scripts narrate how that which constitutes potent masculinist protection becomes a battle between the two patriarchies of state vs. feudal authority. This revised trope about authority must be read in the context of Narendra Modi's potent muscularity overthrowing the incompetent, feminized Manmohan Singh government.

Kajri Jain notes how the Ram Janmabhoomi movement appropriated the affective space engendered by Amitabh Bachchan's Angry Young Man [6] persona in the late 70s and 80s (Jain 2001). With the collapse of the Nehruvian imagination, the Indira Gandhi regime fostered an environment of disaffection stimulated by a series of populist policies and a gradual liberalizing of the economy. The assertive and militant Angry Young Man became a signifier of the "aesthetic of mass mobilization" for the working class and castes (Prasad 2000). Embroiled in an oedipal battle then stated in terms of legality versus illegality, the Angry Young Man was continually elected as a representative of the marginalized to fight a common enemy but then led on a fatalistic path of self-destruction. With Amitabh Bachchan's temporary retirement in the late 80s, the electorate felt a sudden vacuum for a militant, muscular hero who can fight for the cause of a unified community and resolve a traumatic past. Interestingly, popular Hindi cinema sees the coincident rise of actor Sunny Deol—now a member of parliament with the BJP—celebrated for playing the virile, vigilante action hero whose criminality is sponsored by an ineffectual legal system. In *Salaakhen* (1998, Guddu Dhanoa), for example, Deol kills his own lawyer (a debauch man responsible for his father, a Gandhian figure's suicide) within the premises of the courthouse, where he delivers a forceful monologue on how the corrupt, impotent state drove him to take the law into his hands to execute justice.

In another area of contemporary culture, paying close attention to the aesthetics that inform Hindu calendar art, Kajri Jain examines how the image of the Hindu god Ram undergoes a striking transformation during this period. In the 1980s, The Ram Janmabhoomi movement asserted that the birthplace of Lord Ram was



The image of militant and muscular Ram juxtaposed against the proposed Ram Mandir in Ayodhya.

the site of the Babri Masjid, an old mosque built by the Mughal emperor Babur and strove to build a temple in its place to restore the nation to its former glory of *Ram Rajya* (the rule of Lord Ram).[7] In considering the political importance of such a cultural restoration, Jain establishes how Hindutva appropriated the network of meanings surrounding the Angry Young Man referent in order to generate an image of Ram as that of a muscular, aggressive warrior and the elected representative of the unified community of Akhand Bharat.[8] Thus the demand for a Ram Temple was instrumental to the rise of the Bharatiya Janta Party.

Following a line of argument such as Jain's, I wish here to trace such a pattern in contemporary cinema. These two films—*Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* and *Pad Man*—appropriate the registers of a distinctly upper-caste vernacular masculinity associated with provincial North India or the Hindi-heartland and delineate the transformation of a new male subjectivity that can now conjugate with “New India.”

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha: re-inventing the feudal family



Vimalnath is driving in the fields when he runs into Jaya defecating.

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha follows the story of Keshav and Jaya, a couple whose marriage is imperiled by the absence of a toilet in Keshav's home or in a public toilet in the village. A progressive woman who topped her college exams, Jaya cannot defecate in the fields with the "lota party" (a troupe of women who travel together in the dark hours of the morning to relieve themselves) since she is accustomed to using a toilet. Keshav's father, Pandit Vimalnath Sharma is a rigid Brahmin (upper caste) priest who considers toilets something to oppose since they are foreign to what his religion prescribes. In one sequence, Vimalnath runs into Jaya while she is defecating in the fields. Jaya immediately covers her face and he suffers a minor accident. At home, Jaya later angrily does her household chores without wearing her *ghunghat* (covering her head with her sari). In a long shot, Jaya and Keshav sit adjacent to each other but appear to be separated by a pillar. Jaya dumps a few plates and her "immodest" attire draws Vimalnath's attention.



Jaya quickly covers her face with her *ghunghat*.



Jaya is miffed with Keshav because of the absence of a toilet in their home.



Vimalnath is uncomfortable seeing his daughter-in-law without a *ghunghat*.

Vimalnath loudly clears his throat and signals Jaya to wear her *ghunghat* as she becomes the object of the feudal patriarch's gaze. Keshav figures as a mediator in this exchange as the images do not switch directly between Vimalnath's discomfort and Jaya's reactions but require Keshav's reconciling presence. Soon, Keshav mimics Vimalnath in a bid to get Jaya to follow through on his tacit orders. Instead, Jaya comically presents Keshav with a glass of water.



Vimalnath clears his throat loudly to make Jaya aware of his presence in the room.



Keshav also clears his throat to get Jaya's attention.



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| An angry Jaya looks at Keshav. | Keshav signals her to wear her <i>ghunghat</i> |



Jaya ignores Keshav and Vimalnath's tacit orders to don her *ghunghat*. Instead, she presents Keshav with a glass of water and orders him to clear his throat.

Jaya and Keshav are located in the background of the frame while Vimalnath stands at the foreground. Notably, the gaze of the feudal patriarch looms large. Yet, this shot is immediately followed by a brazen Jaya instructing Keshav to clear his throat. Noting Vimalnath's displeasure, Keshav explains how the incident at the field is bothering Jaya. Vimalnath dismisses the same as a trivial incident and commends Jaya for covering her face at the fields. Jaya is provoked by the statement and comes forward to meet Vimalnath's gaze even as Keshav tries to stop her. She states, "Well said. This means that there is no need to wear a *ghunghat* in this house." Keshav continues to stand in the middle of the exchange, and both Jaya and Vimalnath look at him angrily before they walk away in opposite directions. Jaya declares that this household is not worthy of the *ghunghat*, a piece of clothing that seeks to avert the woman's eyes from meeting the patriarch's gaze. It is interesting to note that the *ghunghat* is not critiqued for being a patriarchal tool but rather it's a marker of respect that must be earned by a legitimate masculine protector. Jaya eventually leaves Keshav because he fails to provide a permanent solution to her troubles.



Keshav approaches a panchayat and the feudal authorities to build a public toilet in the village.

Keshav brings up the matter of building a public toilet at the Panchayat, a public meeting held for the residents of the village and chaired by the feudal authorities. When announcing the matter, the host subtly jokes about Keshav's wife running away, with a thinly veiled insult directed at his emasculation. The villagers laugh after hearing Keshav's request and are hostile to his appeal. Sarcastically, the *sarpanch* (feudal authority) asks him:

"Do you expect people to sacrifice their culture to build toilets? We achieved freedom from British rule. Now do you want to make us slaves to Western culture?"



The sarpanch expresses anxiety at the intrusion of Western technology and culture in the village.

The dialogue here juxtaposes a reference to colonial rule and the paranoia surrounding the intrusion of "Western culture" through alien, foreign technology against the importance of protecting woman's honor, a referent that is symbolic of communal honor. Keshav's brother explains how a toilet will ensure a safer environment for women. However, the group of women attending the meeting say that they're happy with their lota party. Keshav retorts by asking: "And are you happy by putting your honor at risk by exposing your body to the world?" His statement irritates the village men who then ask how a dishonored man like Keshav whose wife has left him can speak about *izzat* (honor).

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The women of the village express their happiness with the *lota* party. They are not interested in Keshav's modernizing intervention that will protect their 'honor'.



The men of the village are angry at Keshav because he hints that the women of the village are 'dishonored' during open defecation.

The film depicts as archaic and impotent this older virility of a feudal authority that basks in the glory of rejecting the "foreign." Pradhan, a sympathetic progressive elder, asks Keshav to visit the government office that presides over the Panchayat where he can file an application for this request. Pradhan's intervention repositions the balance of power between the modern state and premodern feudal authority. Irritated, the sarpanch scolds Pradhan and warns Keshav against betraying the nation's cultural values. He quotes a passage from the *Manusmriti* (a Brahmanical scripture infamous for prescribing norms for the strict adherence of the caste hierarchy) in both Sanskrit and Hindi, stating that Manu clearly prescribes that one must defecate outside one's home. He adds:

"Did Ram and Sita get toilets built for themselves while they were living in the jungle?"

The sarpanch's reference to the Ramayana echoes an investment in the ideal of *Ram Rajya*. Keshav aggressively responds by completing the passage, also in Sanskrit and Hindi, to explain how the many prescriptions of the *Manusmriti* are regularly flouted because of open defecation. Keshav reclaims scriptural authority from the archaic feudal patriarch who is incapable of securing the "izzat" of the village women.

Keshav embarks upon the task of meeting bureaucratic officials to demand a public toilet. This event is scripted to undo an older trope of corrupt, impotent government machinery. Jaya investigates how toilet-related scams were rampant four years ago (before the Modi government came to power). When Keshav aggressively asserts his rights as a citizen, a laughing bureaucratic official explains to him that the government built the required pipes in the village, but the villagers did not welcome the move. The official directs Keshav's attention towards the overarching presence of an archaic Brahmanism preventing people from embracing the modern state's intervention into hygiene. Keshav must battle Brahmanvad to build a toilet, not the government.



The bureaucratic official laughs at Keshav for questioning the government's competency when the villagers and an archaic Brahmanvad are responsible for the absence of a public toilet in his village.



The officer explains how the government constructed the required pipes in the village however the villagers closed them because they did not want toilets in their homes.

Pallavi Rao notes how the film's superficial invocation of Brahmanism valorizes an imagination of a local, culturalized mindset rather than an economy (Rao



Pradhan asks Keshav to approach the government office that has more power than the panchayat.



A confident and aggressive Keshav walks away from the Panchayat after he declares that he will make sure that a public toilet is constructed in the village.



Keshav is conducting a *bhoomi puja* before the construction of a toilet in his home. The *bhoomi puja* is a Brahmanical ritual that is conducted before the building of a structure. Notably, Keshav can continue practicing Brahmanical rituals while battling Brahmanvad. With his modernizing interventions, Brahmanvad is not going to be annihilated. Rather, with his scriptural authority, it will go through a process of 'reform' where a more legitimate and forceful version of Brahmanism that can protect Hindu women's honor will empower the Hindu nationalist state.



Keshav is purchasing amenities for his toilet.

2019). The film argues that open defecation can be curtailed by attacking a system of archaic thought but not the underpinning material relations that structure caste. In particular, Rao notes that the film elides mentioning how the functioning of a public toilet extracts labor from "lower" caste Dalit-Bahujan workers who continue to work in their hereditary professions as dictated by the caste economy. Furthermore, Rao notes how the film aligns with the narrow and oversimplified philosophy of the Modi government's *Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan* that seeks to build a clean India free of open defecation. Notably, the program's underlying assumptions assume that widespread ignorance and a lack of toilets are responsible for this continued practice over the persistence of a caste economy. Rao also argues,

"[The film] naturalizes notions of Brahmin hegemony and caste dharma by idealizing the protagonist as an agential citizen-subject, divesting the state of institutional responsibility to end open defecation leading to the construction of a neo-liberal authoritarianism." (Rao 80)

As a competent consumer-citizen subject, Keshav eventually decides to build a private toilet in his home. He must battle his orthodox father, a proponent of Brahmanvad and he ultimately fails when the toilet is destroyed.



There is product placement for Kajaria tiles during the construction of the toilet. The lead actor Akshay Kumar sponsors this product. Interestingly, in an advertisement for Kajaria tiles released in November 2016 (a few months after the surgical strike in Uri), Kumar starred as a soldier protecting Indian soil. He promoted tiles that are 'made from Indian soil to build India'. A commodity that addresses individuated consumerist subjectivity is indexed to a larger social map.



A commodity that addresses individuated consumerist subjectivity is indexed to a larger social map. Keshav sends a selfie with the toilet to Jaya. The image of Taj Mahal on the door refers to an internal joke between them. While Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal to express his love for Mumtaaz, Keshav built a toilet for Jaya.

In a desperate attempt to garner attention and stimulate government intervention, Jaya and Keshav file for a divorce. The media highlights their case, and the bureaucratic institutions are compelled to work at a faster pace to build a public toilet.




A report in a prominent Hindi newspaper announces that a couple is getting divorced for the sake of a toilet. Jaya and Keshav's divorce will be the first divorce in the village's history.



An infuriated Vimalnath watches Jaya's interview. She explains that the government must bring in strong legislation that makes open defecation illegal and argues that no women should marry into a

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| | home without a toilet. |
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| <p>A group of women watch Jaya's interview. She holds the the <i>loti</i> party's complacency responsible for the breakdown of her marriage. Interestingly, the film emphasizes that 'women are women's worst enemies' when Jaya's conservative mother urges her to return to her marital home while her progressive father and grandfather support her protests. Furthermore, Jaya's grandmother-in-law also insults her for being too educated and ultramodern. It is interesting to note how the film is also contesting the terrain of ideal Indian womanhood by projecting Jaya-the Brahmin, 'meritorious' topper who is vocal about her demands but simultaneously refuses to 'break' her marital home as the ideal Indian woman</p> | <p>The media reports eventually reach the chief minister. He is inspired by Modi's strong demonetization (<i>notebandi</i>) move and decides to lock all the toilets in bureaucratic offices across Uttar Pradesh until the construction of the public toilet in Keshav's village begins. This forceful political move emphasizes how the competent state and effective government machinery is associated with a virile risk-taker that is willing to enforce strict measures for the greater good.</p> |



Jaya and Keshav lament their imminent





The night before their divorce, Keshav suggests that they move out of Vimalnath's home. In an interesting script development, Jaya states that she cannot "break" Keshav's home yet she is willing to end their marriage. The film maps out a limit to Jaya's transgressions—her protest is contained by her respect for the fundamental institution of the feudal family. Furthermore, Jaya asserts a social consciousness: if she relents after putting up this fight, no woman in the country will ever be able

separation. The couple cannot be a secessionist and nucleated unit but must be absorbed into the feudal family so that the modernizing intervention of the state can receive widespread approval.

to demand her rights. Demanding a toilet is inextricably linked to protecting women’s honor. In this way, the *state’s* modernizing intervention will enable the feudal family to re-invent itself as a legitimate institution that can protect woman’s honor, now a referent for communitarian honor.

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| Inspired by Jaya, a group of angry women approach lawyers to divorce their husbands because of the absence of a toilet in their homes. | The awoken women of the village express their solidarity for Jaya and put forth their demands for a toilet. They refuse to be a part of the <i>lota</i> party and rebel against the open defecation that puts their lives and ‘honor’ and stake. |

Towards the film’s end, the family comes together at the court. A timely intervention of the modern state ensures that the couple reunite, when they might have separated because of a feudal patriarch’s archaic, impotent values. Interestingly, this state intervention came from the efforts of a chief minister inspired by Narendra Modi’s de-monetization drive. Furthermore, a reformed Vimalnath arrives at the scene and Jaya immediately dons her *ghunghat* upon seeing him. Vimalnath asks Jaya to abandon the *ghunghat* and the fake display of shame and modesty associated with it. She is free to meet the re-invented feudal patriarch’s gaze who is now subsumed under the modern state. In the last sequence, Jaya wears a *ghunghat* as she inaugurates the toilet and she touches Vimalnath’s feet immediately after cutting the ribbon. [9] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The reunited feudal family celebrates the arrival of the competent modern state as the entire village watches.

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| Jaya immediately wears her <i>ghunghat</i> and Keshav touches Vimalnath’s feet when he arrives at the family court after the judge has announced the construction of the public toilet and denied the appeal for divorce. | The reunited family performs a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the toilet. Notably, Jaya continues to wear a <i>ghunghat</i> even as the reformed Vimalnath asked her not to as a marker of respect for the joint feudal family. |
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| Jaya touches Vimalnath’s feet before cutting the ribbon. | The media and village surround the happy feudal family as the modernizing intervention is finally met with widespread approval and joy. |

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Pad Man: vernacularizing foreign technology



A menstruating Gayatri sits in a room outside the home.

Pad Man is inspired by the life of Arunachalam Muruganatham, a Tamil social entrepreneur who overcame great struggle to produce cheap sanitary napkins. It is important to note how the film situates Muruganatham's narrative in the Hindi speaking region of Madhya Pradesh over Tamil Nadu. The film develops a story about newly married mechanic Lakshmikanth Chauhan, who is very protective about Gayatri, his wife, and invents machines to make her life easier. When Gayatri gets her period and is relegated to a room outside the house (her periods make her a "polluting" presence according to Hindu traditions), Lakshmi urges her to enter the house and give up that regressive practice. Yet, Gayatri cites tradition and begs him not to interfere in "women's matters." Lakshmi is disgusted by the cloth that Gayatri uses during her periods. Oblivious to the stigma around menstruation, he buys her a pad. Lakshmi is surprised to learn how expensive sanitary napkins are and Gayatri urges him to return the purchase.



In Lakshmi's dream, Gayatri suddenly falls ill during her period.



A frightened Lakshmi rushes Gayatri to the hospital.



Lakshmi tries to make his own pad.



Lakshmi searches for new test subjects outside a medical college for women.



Gayatri and Lakshmi's marriage is in trouble because of Lakshmi's obsession to manufacture pads.

At a hospital, Lakshmi learns about the importance of menstrual hygiene and has a nightmare where Gayatri dies because of poor hygiene. He becomes committed to manufacturing a pad for his wife. Yet, Lakshmi struggles to find new test subjects and is regularly shunned by the villagers. Like Keshav, Lakshmi must battle an incompetent feudal space that resists the intrusion of foreign technology at the risk of putting women's lives in danger. Significantly, Lakshmi cannot simply purchase the expensive pads that are available in the market (produced by large multinational corporations). He must build cheap sanitary napkins that will help all of womankind. Like Keshav, his conjugal troubles are directed at resolving the contradictions of an uneven modernity via a specific virile, masculine subjectivity that can grapple with these contradictions to "protect" women. After the village forces him into exile and Gayatri's brothers take her away, Lakshmi works at a professor's home as a servant to learn about the manufacturing of pads.



Lakshmi tested a pad on himself using a balloon filled with goat blood. His experiment fails miserably.



Lakshmi jumps into the river 'polluting' it with goat blood.



At a hearing in the *panchayat* against Lakshmi for his strange antics, villagers hypothesize he is possessed by an evil spirit and think of ways to punish him.



An ashamed Gayatri bids Lakshmi farewell. She returns to her brother's home. Notably, she states that shame is the most important thing for women, and it is better to die than to be 'shamed'.

When the professor discovers that Lakshmi wants to build pads, he questions his servant's manhood. In response, the righteous Lakshmi asks, "How can a person who is incapable of protecting a woman from danger call himself a man?" The next morning, the professor mocks Lakshmi as he shows him a video featuring the expensive and convoluted machine that manufactures pads. He states:

"If you want to give pads to a woman to protect her, work harder and earn more money so you can purchase them for her. Be a man, not a fool."

In fact, those words urge Lakshmi to confront the complexity of the neoliberal marketplace and presume that the only agency available to an illiterate, emotional fool like him is that of an individuated consumer. Furthermore, the professor directs him to be a competent man in the sense of being a competent consumer. Yet, the enterprising, innovative Lakshmi remains unpersuaded by this rhetoric as he watches the video. He vernacularizes the complex, foreign technology by immediately connecting the four processes depicted in the video to everyday activities that Gayatri carries out as a part of her daily chores:

- pulverization becomes *bhoosa*-tion akin to how Gayatri made a coconut paste by crushing bits of coconut,
- compression becomes *chapta*-tion comparable to how the roti (bread) is flattened,
- interfusion becomes *potlay*-tion connected to how lunch is wrapped in leaves,
- sterilization becomes *saafsutra*-tion linked to how chilies are put in sunlight to kill bacteria.

The complicated machine's workings seem intelligible to the illiterate yet intuitive (feminized) Lakshmi; he can translate alien technology by connecting it to activities carried out in the private sphere of the home. It is useful to note the script's relation to ideology: the private sphere/home is the domain where the Indian nationalists proclaimed superiority over the West. *Pad Man* ties Lakshmi's technological expertise inextricably to his keen observation of his wife and the home.



After watching a video on pad manufacturing, the smug professor counsels Lakshmi about manhood. He urges him to work harder and earn more money instead of following an impossible dream.



Lakshmi connects interfusion with...



... *potl*ay-tion, noting how the process is similar to the way in which Gayatri wrapped his lunch in leaves.



Lakshmi explains how his machine works to the judges.



Lakshmi is finally rewarded for his efforts and wins a national award.

Through a random string of events, Pari, an urban, upper middle-class woman with an MBA, becomes Lakshmi's first customer. Pari learns of his struggles and invites him to participate in a competition that rewards new technologies. Lakshmi then wins the President's Award and is felicitated by the super-star Amitabh Bachchan playing himself. Bachchan states, "America has Superman, Batman, and Spiderman but India has Pad Man. This is our real superhero." Finally India can offer a "real" superhero to the arsenal of global (American) superheroes.

Pari informs Lakshmi that he will be receiving a patent to safeguard his intellectual property and it will enable him to sell his machine to a large multinational corporation for a good price. Lakshmi is perturbed to learn this since he did not build the machine for profit. He simply wants affordable pads to be available in the market. Notably, Lakshmi re-directs Pari's selfish, individuated consumer behavior towards a larger social perspective where she can use her marketing genius to assist Lakshmi's cause. The film indicates that Pari is at the threshold of a vulgar modernity that must be tamed and re-oriented to the nation's cause. A legitimate masculine protector can curtail the threat of individuated female consumption gone astray.

Pari and Lakshmi come up with a business model that will enable the women of each village to purchase Lakshmi's machine and run their own business; it's an idea that Lakshmi springs upon when a victim of domestic violence asks him for protection. Lakshmi is eventually asked to speak at the United Nations. The nation gets global acclaim for inventing its "own" technology directed at resolving its own contradictions. Lakshmi delivers his speech in what he describes as "*Linglish*"—juxtaposing Hindi syntax and grammar with the use of English words. The peculiar translations that Lakshmi can perform with respect to a foreign technology and language also seem to relate to the specific audience that the film is aimed at. That is, *Pad Man* had a particular reach with the multiplex audience—a category of the urban, consuming middle classes (who can already afford the pads sold by multinational corporations) because of its niche, taboo topic. Its "urban gaze" was noted by the film critics Poulomi Das and Rahul Desai who point out that the urban, consuming middle classes can subscribe to the agency of an enterprising, innovative rural underdog.



With the aid of Lakshmi's machine, a group of 'empowered' rural businesswomen set out to sell pads.



Lakshmi delivers a speech at the UN in *Linglish*.

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Hindutva modernity and political agency

Michel Foucault offers an analytical understanding of modernity as a critical attitude directed at the contemporary moment; his goal is to chart out its specific inadequacies (Foucault 1984). Alev Cinar builds upon this definition by stating that modernity is “an attitude in action that intervenes in the present to construct it as questionable and troublesome” (Cinar 2005). The modern subject employs such an attitude not merely to reflect upon the present but also to effectively reimagine the present moment as deficient and defective. The subject is then reoriented towards progress or an ideal future. Modernity is thus an intervention that incites change by defaming the present moment to begin movement towards an ideal future where progress is located. If, as Cinar argues, the modernizing intervention finds its legitimacy in trying to change an inadequate, defective present, then the intervening subject gains currency as the agent of modernity who will enact this transition. That person becomes the hero and the nation becomes the victim who can be rescued by the concerned subject’s modernization project.

In the Hindutva imaginary, the pure, upper-caste female body is employed as a symbol that represents the nation; she’s in a corrupt and compromised condition that needs transformation. The intervening subject—the upper-caste male in *TEPK* and *Pad Man*—projects itself as the hero who will liberate the body from its defective present moment and take it in the direction of the ideal future. By rescuing the female nation in need of protection and emancipation, the intervening subject gains political agency, and this agency legitimizes his projects that seek to align society along the lines of a Hindu nationalist ideology. He’s justified by the protection of the honor and wellbeing of the nation, *Bharat Mata* (Mother India).

Interestingly, Rao offers a sharp critique of *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*’s representation of a universalizing Brahmanical modernity:

“The construct of an equalizing nationalist modernity thus has a questionable status, when it is primarily the Brahmin woman, the Brahmin marriage and the Brahmin family that are the agents of such contestations of change. The question of whether women from other castes and religions can stake such a claim in modernity is only addressed superficially towards the film’s climax, and implied as being accessible through a trickle-down eventuality within the universalizing potential of the Brahmin woman’s demands.” (Rao 85)



Lakshmi is given a hero’s welcome at his village after winning the National award.



Gayatri and Lakshmi finally reunite when the memory of painful shaming has been replaced

With Narendra Modi’s modernizing interventions, the protagonist will be the potent, (upper-caste) masculine protector who can vernacularize “foreign” technology to fight any threats to woman’s safety and honor. Lakshmi and Keshav must battle a hostile feudal patriarchy that claims ownership and control over Hindu traditions framed as indispensable elements of national culture. Under the aegis of the modern state and with a reversal in the balance of power, the state can now reclaim the domain of national culture, and its modernizing intervention is ultimately embraced by the feudal authority. There is a long post-credits sequence in *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* featuring the villagers who pledge that they will no longer practice open defecation. Interestingly, Keshav mentions that the

with newfound fame.



A few months before the 2019 general election, Akshay Kumar holds a 'non-political' and 'fun' chat with Narendra Modi. Notably, Modi is infamous for never holding a press conference and for exclusively conducting interviews with journalists that support the BJP.



Akshay Kumar in a no-smoking disclaimer. He advises the poor man to spend money on pads over cigarettes stating that hero-*giri* is about protecting women, not smoking.

Images from Kumar's film *Kesari*:



A valiant Ishar Singh saves an Afghani woman after defying a British officer's orders. He draws the Mullah and the tribe's ire. Notably, this incident fuels their motivation for invading the fort of Saragarhi and not strategic interests.



The 'barbaric' Mullah and the Afghani tribe arrives to avenge their humiliation. They kill the Afghani woman in front of Ishar Singh before

government offered to compensate him for the costs of building a private toilet. Yet, he states, he returned the sum since a competent consumer citizen should not take money from the government to purchase consumer durables. In addition, Lakshmi is re-united with his wife and treated like a hero upon his return to the village, a return that takes place once a National award is granted to him.

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha and *Pad Man* present models of male subjectivity that correlate with New India by charting out the violent transformations that the virile, competent masculine protectors of the nation undertake. Notably, both the films are set in Hindi-heartland states with BJP governments where a set of harsh and dangerous laws have recently been passed to battle "Love Jihad." That term refers to a Hindutva conspiracy theory about Muslim men systematically seducing Hindu women, tricking them into marriage, and forcefully converting them to Islam to produce more Muslim children. In reaction to this myth in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, Hindu nationalist groups acting as the agents of Hindutva modernity boast of a strong surveillance network that can forcefully "protect" emotional, gullible Hindu women from being led "astray." The Madhya Pradesh government has also proposed a policy where all working women will be tracked by the police for their own "protection" and "safety." Hindutva modernizing interventions designed to "protect" Hindu women in fact reinforce virility against the threat of emasculation. In the context of the current environment of severe political and economic instability, the Love Jihad laws celebrate a form of "fetishized sovereignty." Intensified control over Hindu women's bodies and sexuality masks the actual weakening of contemporary political and economic sovereignty. [10] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Due to length, I have not been able to offer a detailed analysis of the crucial operations of stardom. In fact, both these films feature superstar Akshay Kumar as protagonist. Akshay Kumar is popularly recognized as an action-hero who performs highly charged and risky stunts in his films since he has a strong background in martial arts with a black belt in Tae Kwan Do and training in Muay Thai. Interestingly, the actor also hosted three seasons of the stunt-based reality show *Fear Factor: Khatron ke Khiladi* (the Indian version of *Fear Factor*). Furthermore, the actor is famous for maintaining a disciplined and healthy lifestyle. Notably, he frequently describes how his work is structured like a *normal* 9 to 5 job after which he returns to his family at the end of the day. Unlike his superstar counterparts who tend to do one or two big-budget films a year, Kumar has at least three to four releases every year.

The star-text coded with an active, hypermasculine and family-man persona also has direct political associations. Kumar has a strong connection to the Bharatiya Janta Party. In April 2019 (a few weeks before the general elections), Kumar did an infamous interview with Narendra Modi that featured a playful and "apolitical" line of questioning. Notably, the actor has also been repeatedly criticized for tacitly promoting the causes of the Bharatiya Janta Party. He has also been mocked for holding Canadian citizenship that contradicts his nationalist stance in films and public life. Interestingly, Kumar also starred in an anti-smoking disclaimer in which he donned his *Pad Man* attire. In the disclaimer, he urged a man to give up cigarettes so that he can purchase sanitary napkins for his ill wife and assume the role of a "good hero." It is fascinating to note that the anti-smoking disclaimer was directed solely at poor Hindi-speaking men who must give up smoking for the sake of their wives" (menstrual) health. Recently, Kumar has vowed to donate funds for the construction of the "grand and historic" Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and urged his fans to contribute for the same. Notably, he is the only Bollywood (super)star to make such an announcement or to even address the contentious topic of the Ram Mandir publicly.

Nationalism has been a major trope in Kumar's subsequent films including *Gold*

invading the fort.



Ishar Singh asserts that they are not fighting this battle for their salary, uniform, or the British masters but to demonstrate their community and soil's bravery to the world. 21 *azad* (free) Sikhs will fight this battle and be martyred.



Mission Mangal: Rakesh Dhawan and Tara Shinde explain how a technique used in 'Home Science/Economics' through which *pooris* (flatbread) are fried with the use of less oil can economize India's Mars Mission. Tara has this idea while she is guiding her own maid with frying *pooris*.



Mission Mangal: Rakesh draws his own cartoon subverting the idea that Indians possess inferior scientific competency. In his ideal future, Western scientists will be begging India to join their 'Elite Space Club'.

(Reema Kagit, 2018), *Kesari* (Anurag Singh, 2019), and *Mission Mangal* (Jagan Shakti, 2019). The war film *Kesari* recounts the Battle of Sarghari that took place in 1897 between the forces of the British Raj and an army of Afghani tribesman. There is a fascinating moment in the film where Kumar is playing Havildar Ishar Singh, a Sikh soldier. The soldier bitterly observes how India was colonized by the Mughals initially and later by the British Raj. He wonders when they will be free and their "own" will be in power. In fact, the conflation of Mughal rule with colonialism is a crucial part of the Hindutva narrative. Furthermore, the film begins with Ishar Singh protecting an Afghani woman (who is opposing a forced marriage) from punishment by a Mullah and an Afghani tribe. His bravery draws the ire of both a British Officer and the Mullah leading the tribe. Later, the woman is killed before his eyes when the Afghani tribe launches an attack over the Sargarhi fort. Notably, Kumar continues to assert his virility by waging a battle of competent masculinist protection for his motherland and oppressed womankind.

Interestingly, in *Mission Mangal*, Kumar leads the Mars Mission with a team that is largely comprised of women. The film emphasizes the distinct intelligence that Indian women possess because of their unique ability to manage the workplace and the home. In the film, Kumar battles against a westernized NASA scientist who wants the Indian Space Research Organization to allocate its limited resources for collaborations with NASA over their own inferior and unproductive research. *Mission Mangal* celebrates indigenous, scientific competency that can efficiently manage the constraints of limited budgets and administrative barriers with the power of "feminized" knowledge.



Mission Mangal: A cartoon shows an Indian man (wearing traditional/non-Western clothing) and his buffalo begging to enter a western 'Elite Space Club'. ISRO is humiliated globally after a botched mission. The westernized Rupert Desai takes over and urges ISRO to simply borrow and build on NASA's knowledge instead of working on their 'own' projects to avoid international embarrassment.

In conclusion, in this paper, I have discussed how *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* and *Pad Man* situate provincial, "Hindi-heartland" regions as the "nation" by appropriating an affective space engendered by depicting a vernacular masculinity. As demonstrated by Oza, post-liberalization "New India" negotiated contemporary anxieties about the intrusion of foreign capital and a painful memory of colonial emasculation by engaging in a distinct rhetoric of masculinist protection. With a concomitant display of fetishized sovereignty, the nation showed that it was capable of building its "own" technology to secure its borders. Similarly, by exercising intensified surveillance and control over Hindu women's bodies, the agents of Hindutva modernity celebrate the nation's makeover. The men of New India stake claim to political agency by protecting "their" women and

the nation (*Bharat Mata*) from 'threat' in a time of deep economic and political turmoil.

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Notes

Acknowledgements: I want to thank Anindya Sengupta and Khaliq Parkar for their helpful feedback on an older draft of this essay. I'd also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their important suggestions.

1. In September 2016, four terrorists belonging to the Jaish-e-Mohammed attacked the Indian Army Headquarters in Uri. A few weeks after the attack, India asserted that it did a surgical strike in Pakistan that claimed the lives of 35-70 personnel. Pakistan denied that this attack took place. Subsequently, the term "surgical strike" became a popular signifier of Hindu nationalist virility and might and members of the Bharatiya Janta Party use it frequently to describe their activities (such as the demonetization drive when Modi claimed to carry out a surgical strike against black money by demonetizing 500- and 1000-rupee notes). When students of my own university protested the entry of BJP minister Babul Supriyo in November 2019, Dilip Ghosh, the West Bengal president of the BJP threatened to do a surgical strike in Jadavpur University. [\[return to page 1\]](#)

2. In February 2019, a (Kashmiri) suicide bomber from the Jaish-e-Mohammed attacked a convoy of the Indian paramilitary police on the Jammu Srinagar National Highway. In an environment of intense bigotry and deep political turmoil, many Kashmiri students residing in different parts of India were evicted from their homes and faced violent situations that forced most of them to return to Kashmir. In response to the attack, India carried out a controversial, "non-military" and "pre-emptive" air strike in Balakot and asserted that it killed approximately 250 terrorists and obliterated a terrorist-training camp. However, there is a lack of evidence to support this claim and it has been extensively questioned by global media.

3. In August 2019, the state of Jammu and Kashmir (a disputed territory) was reconstituted by the Indian government to form the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Formerly, Kashmir was protected by a special status granted to it by Article 370 in the Indian constitution whereby it was governed by its own set of laws. The move was enforced by imposing a total communication blackout and security lockdown in Jammu and Kashmir in the interest of "curbing terrorism and unrest." Nearly 4000 people have been arrested in the region since then including prominent Kashmiri politicians.

4. Radha is the protagonist of *Mother India*. In the film, she is forced to kill her estranged son because he was trying to kidnap (and implicitly rape) the feudal moneylender's daughter. She protects the village's "honor" by killing her son. Notably, the film is titled in response to Katherine Mayo's racist and controversial book of the same name. Radha is a representation of an ideal Indian womanhood deeply connected to the image of the emerging Nehruvian nation.

5. Suvadip Sinha details how north Indian small towns (located in the Hindi-heartland of India) index an emerging form of vernacular masculinity by re-shaping a distinct, non-urban Indian manhood. In the late 2000s and early 2010s,

Hindi cinema turns to the in-between provincial North India with an aesthetic of *disidentificatory realism* that generates a sense of alienation and an assurance of “authenticity” for the urban audience. In the context of the rapidly globalizing metro cities, Bollywood’s gritty and unstable representation of provincial North India metonymically represents the image of “real India.”

6. Amitabh Bachchan is a popular Hindi film actor who gained massive popularity for playing the Angry Young Man in a set of films during the Emergency (1975-1977). Madhav Prasad provides sharp ideological analysis about his popularity and appeal in *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*.

7. Since the late 19th century, militant Hindu ascetics have been asserting that Babri Masjid is the site of Lord Ram’s birthplace. In December 1949, the idols of Ram and Sita were placed inside the mosque (it was claimed that they miraculously appeared there) and the mosque was declared to be a disputed area. In the 1980s, many Hindu nationalist organizations associated with the BJP including the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Bajrang Dal began the Ram Janmabhoomi movement to build a Ram Temple at the site of the mosque. Tensions escalated in December 1992 when a set of militant Hindu nationalists demolished the mosque. Notably, the construction of the Ram Temple began with aplomb in August 2020- on the first anniversary of the abrogation of Article 370, symbolically announcing the Hindu Nation’s victory within disputed territories. The ceremony was attended by Narendra Modi and many other prominent members of the BJP and RSS.

8. Akhand Bharat refers to the image of unified India before the Partition took place. It is an irredentist map commonly deployed by Hindu Nationalist organizations. The term was coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a prominent Hindu Nationalist leader who wanted a Greater India uniting Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs but excluding Muslims and Christians who were advised to seek territory in their respective “spiritual homelands.”

9. Touching the feet of the elderly is a popular Brahmanical Hindu custom. It is believed that one gains blessings and intellect from touching the feet of the elderly. [[return to page 2](#)]

10. There is an ongoing border dispute between India and China that poses a strong challenge to India’s territorial sovereignty. Furthermore, the country is also facing its worst recession to date. [[return to page 4](#)]

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Priyanka Chopra's "Jai Hind" tweet.



Priyanka Chopra listens as Ayesha Malik calls her out a "hypocrite" at the Beautycon event in August 2019.

"Brand Priyanka Chopra": neoliberal individuality, citizenship, and the transnational female celebrity

by [Namrata Rele Sathe](#)

Priyanka Chopra: a multifaceted celebrity

In August 2019, actor and transnational celebrity Priyanka Chopra found herself cornered by a tricky question at the Los Angeles Beautycon Festival. A Pakistani journalist, Ayesha Malik, referred to a tweet that Chopra had posted in February 2019 that cheered on India's military air strikes on Pakistan. The tweet—which read "Jai Hind (Victory to India) #IndianArmedForces"—hailed the Indian Army attacks in Pakistan. Malik called out Chopra as a "hypocrite," adding that her jingoistic tweet congratulating India's military aggression towards Pakistan appeared contradictory to her role as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador. Chopra, without batting an eyelid, responded coolly, first by asking Malik if she had "finished venting" and then by answering thus:

"So, I have many, many friends from Pakistan, and I am from India, and war is not something that I am really fond of, but I am patriotic. So, I'm sorry if I hurt sentiments of people who do love me and have loved me, but I think that all of us have a sort of middle ground that we all have to walk, just like you probably do, as well (sic)."

This incident, widely publicized at the time, unveils a dichotomy in Chopra's well-crafted star persona. Chopra was at a fashion and beauty brand promotion event to talk about her beauty regimen and was, instead, drawn into a political debate on current national affairs.

When Chopra talks about having to walk a "middle ground," she reveals the difficulty of being a transnational star, of appealing at all times to all factions and offending none. This is a key aspect of Chopra's star persona; in that persona she must not divulge starkly radical or partisan political opinions for fear of losing fan following and public backlash. In this case, it is useful to know that Chopra's parents are both medical doctors in the Indian Army. Such a detail might explain her willingness to align with right-wing strains of patriotism in India, which in the present context, most vehemently coalesce around its military prowess against neighboring Pakistan. War mongering against Pakistan, in Hindu fundamentalist (or Hindutva) India, functions as a political ploy to channel both Islamophobia against India's Muslim population and nationalist anger against Pakistan. Indian Muslims are often accused of "siding with" Pakistan and told to "go to Pakistan" if they express any dissent towards the government. In the past, superstars such as Shah Rukh Khan and Aamir Khan, both Muslims, have been questioned about their loyalty as Indian citizens when they expressed their views on the country's



Ayesha Malik questioning Priyanka Chopra at the Beautycon event. Malik stated that Chopra, in her tweet, was "encouraging nuclear war against Pakistan."

growing religious intolerance. This is the cultural-political context that Chopra, as a star, navigates. While she must present herself as cosmopolitan, she must also make sure she does not displease her Indian fans, who might expect her to show support towards the ruling party.

Chopra's success story is undergirded by the idea that the neoliberal subject presents itself as one that can overcome structural inconsistencies through radical self-invention, rather than systemic change and collective organization. Usually Chopra's astute navigation of her celebrity persona is constituted by narratives of "Indian womanhood" and cosmopolitan femininity. Here, I focus on how Chopra's transnational star persona has been constructed via her role in *Baywatch* and her appearances on several forums related to "women's empowerment," in which she presents herself as a feminist icon and successful entrepreneur. I inquire into the multiple dimensions of the Chopra brand and the contradictions between the idea of transnational celebrity and rooted citizenship, here illustrated by an analysis of Chopra's star persona within India's right-wing political regime. Chopra's celebrity persona presents to the world an image of the modern yet traditional Indian woman, who can win hearts on the world stage but still be a patriotic citizen and follow traditional customs. But her persona is far from liminal (in the way that Chopra herself defines it) and always limited by real-life contexts of politics, gender and nationality.

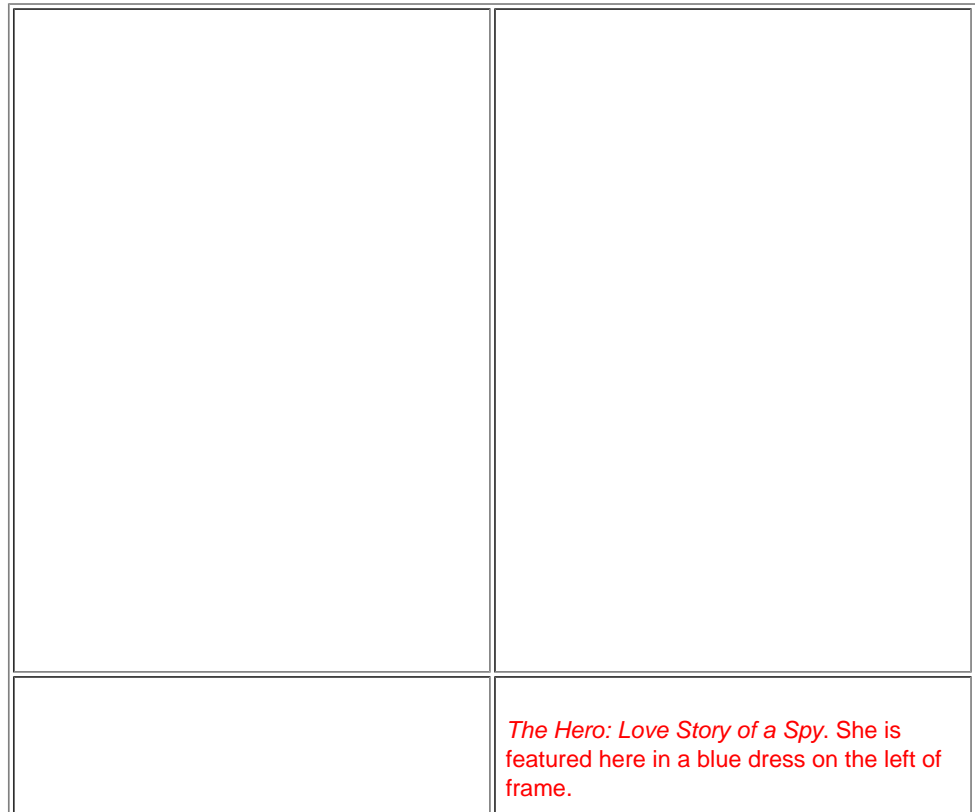
Chopra started out as a model, coming in second in the 2000 Miss India contest and winning the Miss World pageant in the same year, at the age of eighteen. She began working in Hindi cinema in 2002 with *The Hero: Love Story of a Spy* (Anil Sharma), and, since then, has acted in over 50 Hindi films.



Chopra being crowned Miss World 2000.



A promotional poster of Chopra's first film



In 2012, she began her Hollywood career as a recording artist, collaborating with popular US-American musicians such as Pitbull and will.i.am on music singles. She debuted on US-American network television with the show *Quantico* in 2015, which ran on ABC network in the United States for three seasons and simultaneously aired on Star India network in India (a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Corporation). In 2017, she starred in her first Hollywood film *Baywatch* (Seth Gordon) and, in the same year, was named a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for children's rights and girls' education. Chopra helms a media production company with her mother, Madhu Chopra, called *Purple Pebble Pictures* that is based in Mumbai and produces regional Indian language films. In 2018, she also became an investor in the dating app Bumble, popularly regarded as a "feminist" app because it allows women to make the first move so that they do not receive any unsolicited messages or pictures from men.

Ever since Priyanka Chopra moved to Hollywood to establish herself as a transnational celebrity, she has made strategic forays into remaking herself as a multidimensional, multimedia star whose celebrity extends in several directions. Chopra performs myriad roles as a professional woman; her star brand consists



Chopra features in the #EqualNotLoose campaign by the dating app Bumble, which she also invests in.

not only of her creative ventures as an actor and recording artist, but also her roles as a film producer, an app investor, and the go-to girl for various causes related to women's empowerment. When asked about her journey to Hollywood stardom on public forums, Chopra speaks of her unconventional career choices which have made her an exception to the norm. She narrativizes her success by regarding herself as a woman who, through sheer hard work and determination, has been able to beat patriarchy and racial bias in the entertainment industry and gain world-fame. However, these diverse aspects of her star brand also make it unstable in certain situations, as witnessed in the Beautycon example, exposing its careful yet fragile construction.

Baywatch: the threat of the “billionaire bombshell”



A promotional poster of *Baywatch* which features Chopra as the lead antagonist of the film. With the bat-themed dress and a gun strapped to a holster on her thigh, she exemplifies the sexy but dangerous woman.

Chopra's first Hollywood film, *Baywatch*, which released in the summer of 2017, featured superstars Dwayne Johnson and Zac Efron in lead roles. The film is based on the popular television show of the same name, which aired in the United States on NBC from 1989 to 2001. Basing its characters and setting on the show, the film follows a group of lifeguards, led by Mitch Buchannon (Johnson), who double-up as crime-fighting vigilantes in Emerald Bay, Florida. Chopra plays the antagonist, Victoria Leeds, an immigrant woman who runs a successful real estate business that operates as a front for a drug smuggling racket. Chopra, in various interviews, has described her character as a “billionaire bombshell” (in *GQ* magazine) and “billionaire bitch on a beach wearing couture” (*Marie Claire*).

Baywatch (the film) is acutely aware of its camp legacy of objectifying male and female bodies and the original show's racial homogeneity, which it tries to shake up for a global market, now changed by the mainstreaming of issues related to representation of women and minorities in Hollywood. However, Chopra's character – an entrepreneurial woman and a racial outsider – is the unstable element in the text. Leeds' character becomes the ideological catchment for both the progressive aspects of the film (by mouthing statements about gender discrimination at frequent intervals) and its inherent discomfort with a body coded as Other by gender and race.

The show *Baywatch* was one of the first US-American shows to be broadcast in India when television began to be privatized as part of the country's formal turn to neoliberalism in the early 1990s. The show, with its idealized representations of beautiful white bodies and highly sexualized imagery, was a novelty on Indian television, which until then consisted only of Doordarshan, India's state-controlled television network. *Baywatch*, in the words of Appadurai (1998), forms an important part of the “imagined world” created by the “mediascape” (p. 35) of neoliberal modernity in India. These translocal mediascapes offered people the



Chopra as Victoria Leeds in *Baywatch*. She has described her character as a “billionaire bombshell” in interviews for the film.



Baywatch, in the 1990s, was a popular show in India. It was one of the first US shows to be broadcast on Indian screens, along with others such as *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Beverly Hills 90210*, after the privatization of television.



Chopra's various looks in *Baywatch*. ...

possibility of living “imagined lives” even as they helped to “constitute narratives of the Other and protonarratives of possible lives” for themselves (Appadurai, p. 35). [[open notes reference page in new window](#)] Casting Chopra as Leeds, when she is at the peak of her global celebrity, then, was a clever way for the producers of *Baywatch* to reach an already primed transnational audience in India, who might have watched the show when it was telecast in the 1990s.

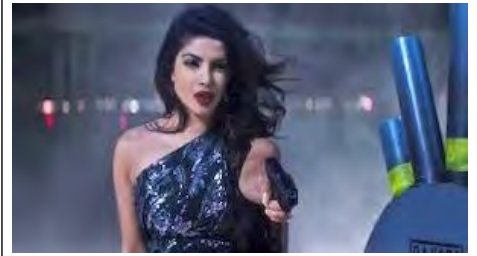
Chopra, in promotional interviews for the *Baywatch* film, has spoken about watching the show as a young girl. In these interviews, Chopra expresses nostalgia about watching *Baywatch* while growing up in the 90s in the small town of Bareilly in north India. Chopra belongs to that group of middle-class Indians for whom “possible lives” of upward mobility became abundantly achievable after India’s economic liberalization. However, for countless others belonging to the working classes and marginalized castes, the possibility of living a financially secure life in their own country, leave alone on the sunny *Baywatch* shores of the distant United States, remains acutely impossible. The idea of the hardworking neoliberal self, willing to struggle through all of life’s obstacles, is the narrative that underpins the increased wealth and social power of the middle-classes post India’s turn to neoliberal policies. However, this success story often obscures the social advantages accrued by this class of Indians (to which Chopra belongs), in terms of being financially stable and having an English-language education, so that they were already halfway to imagining a possible immigrant self in the United States.

In *Baywatch*, Chopra as Leeds embodies a femininity that is problematic because of her over-reaching business ambitions and racial difference. Chopra – noticeably dark-skinned and attired in obviously sexy fashionable dresses – performs a femininity that is at once normative (in terms of the overt sexuality coded in her costumes and body language) and transgressive in her extremely driven and ruthlessly mercenary nature.

The name of her character, Victoria Leeds, forwards the idea that the film was meant for a global audience. The connotations of her first and last names – “Victoria” (a British monarch) and “Leeds” (a city in England) – make her palatable to a predominantly US-American audience that finds Britishness attractive. The name, thus, exoticizes her (in her British-sounding name) and orientalizes her (in her skin tone). Saïd (1979) has argued that an Orientalist worldview homogenizes and merges together swathes of distinct cultures and nations of the colonized into an imaginary Other that must be conquered. Leeds’ Anglicized name frees her of the burden of carrying the caste-religious ethnic baggage of conflicted South Asian identities. She is, thus, accessible as a symbolic figure to the Orientalist gaze – as one without history or cultural memory.

Through her interactions with other characters, we are made aware that she is a migrant. At one point, when a character asks her why she came to the United States, Leeds replies that it was because of “gender discrimination.” She does not explain exactly what happened to her in her home culture, but her views rely on a generalized and popular notion that imagines the backward Third World as the other of the advanced “West.” Her remark alludes to the wide circulation of the “American Dream” ideology, which prompts people to leave their homelands and head to the States. Leeds’ presentation as an immigrant woman, who has escaped from an unnamed oppressive country to come to the United States, immediately stokes cultural and patriotic pride within US-based audiences. Additionally, it also becomes the underlying logic for her sexualized persona as the antagonist: Leeds is free to be overtly sexy because now she is in the United States. Through Leeds’ character, the film suggests that for a migrant woman of color from the Third

World, the United States is an attractive option to lead an emancipated life and to become an independent business-woman.



Leeds, the character played by Chopra, is always seen in high-fashion, overtly sexy dresses, inviting the viewer to focus on her body.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Leeds uses a Tag Heuer watch as a bribe in a scene from *Baywatch*. Chopra is the brand ambassador of this luxury line of watches.



Leeds, moments before her death, in *Baywatch*. "You know the best thing about winning? It's that you get to write the story of what happened," she says, presuming that she is about to kill Buchannan (Dwayne Johnson) and Brody (Zac Efron) and get away with her crimes.



The explosion of firecrackers that kills Leeds.

In *Transnational America*, Grewal (2005) has explained how "American" nationalities are formed in the United States and other parts of the world via the production of global consumers. Grewal argues,

"As a superpower, America produced subjects outside its territorial boundaries through its ability to disseminate neoliberal technologies through multiple channels. [...] The relevance of America was not solely in the subjects it produced within the United States but in its ability to create networks of knowledge and power, cosmopolitan and 'global,' that traversed and rearticulated national boundaries" (p. 2-3). [\[open endnotes and references in new window\]](#)

In the production of the "cosmopolitan" citizen-consumer is embedded the ideology that market-based choices offer the potential of creating individualized and freely choosing subjects – a notion that, according to Grewal, also formed the basis of liberal feminism. This engendered "lifestyles of empowerment" (Grewal, p. 16) that proved especially useful for the migrant female consumer to chart a course of emancipation from her restrictive home culture. As Grewal argues further,

"Choice here was not only the act through which freedom could be understood as central to the subject of modern American as well as of liberal feminism, but also an important aspect of neoliberal culture's imbrication within the liberalism of democratic 'choice' figured as 'freedom.' The particular 'freedom' of 'America' thus became the ability to have the 'choices' denied to those in 'traditional' societies and 'cultures'" (p. 65).

Chopra, playing Leeds in *Baywatch*, is an example of such a liberated woman, who was able to pursue her entrepreneurial ambition in the proverbial land of opportunities by becoming a high-value consumer.

We see this coded into the visual imagery of the film in Leeds' expensive-looking clothes and other conspicuous markers of a wealthy lifestyle. She owns a yacht and has several people (mostly men) at her beck and call. In one scene, Leeds bribes a local politician with a Tag Heuer watch (made prominently visible in the shot because Chopra is the brand ambassador for this luxury line of watches). She is the affluent female consumer, at the helm of a criminal enterprise and real estate business, who acts deliberately and always to increase her wealth and power. In this scene, though, the extratextual star persona of Chopra as a Tag Heuer brand ambassador merges seamlessly into the role that she is playing in the film, coding the star and the character at once as consumers of high-end luxury items.

In the climax of the film, Leeds is cruelly punished for her excesses: she is killed by an explosion of heavy-duty firecrackers and all that is left of her is a severed leg and a high-heeled shoe. This dramatic end comes when Leeds is trying to kill Brody (played by Zac Efron). Her last words to Buchannan, as he is trying to save Brody, are, "If I was a man, you would call me driven." These scathing words are followed, unexpectedly, by an explosion and, after a few seconds, we see her severed leg drop down from the sky in an instant that is both comic



Brody reacts to Leeds' gruesome death as first her shoe...



...and then her severed leg falls from the sky after her body is blown apart by an explosion of firecrackers.

and gruesome. The character of Leeds incorporates a volatile presence in the film text – as a brown woman, as a woman engaged in business, and as a criminal mastermind – who needs to be completely annihilated. Even though Chopra's inclusion in the film is an example of a more diverse representation of people of color in mainstream Hollywood and a significant career milestone for Chopra as a transnational star, I read her violent textual death as the film's inability to assimilate her presence.

In contrast to Chopra's role in *Baywatch*, Chopra's ethnicity has been used in far more conventional ways in her other media-related ventures in Hollywood. For instance, in 2013, Chopra released one of her first music videos called "Exotic," the subtext of which plays off the fact that Chopra is brown-skinned. The video begins with Chopra emerging from the sea in a bathing suit, as the camera lingers over her body, visually interpreting the lyrics in which she tells us that she is "exotic" and "hotter than the tropics."



A shot from the "Exotic" music video – one of many in which Chopra features in a fashion model pose.



Chopra dances in the foreground with the backdrop of a tropical forest. The dim lighting and her all-black costume serve to highlight her brown skin and emphasise her Otherness



Chopra in her "Exotic" music video. As the video begins, we see her emerge from the water in a bathing suit, palm trees and the ocean in the background, indicating that like the setting, she is also *exotic*.

Phrases such as "desi girl" (Indian girl) and "pardesi babu" (a man from a foreign country) are included to signify her transnational status. Chopra is captured in various poses throughout the video, always in bathing suits and high heels, a throwback to her erstwhile career as a model and beauty queen. In an extended dance sequence towards the end of the video, Chopra is placed in a mise-en-scène of a tropical forest and dressed in black. The dimly lit background emphasizes Chopra's body and her darker skin tone. The way in which Chopra is presented in the video indicates that her brown skin tone is a marketable aspect of her stardom, which has been effectively used in this case to commodify her ethnicity and popularize her in an international context. The Leeds character in *Baywatch*, thus, becomes an extension of this commodification that simultaneously eroticizes and tames the other by sexualizing her in conventional "western" wear.

Similarly, the television drama *Quantico* (2015-2018) overplays the fact that Chopra is a brown-skinned, second generation Indian American. She plays the protagonist Alex Parrish in the series, a driven and ambitious FBI trainee and the best in her program. In the first season, Chopra becomes embroiled in a terrorist attack on a New York subway in which she is the main suspect. In Episode 5, Parrish directly addresses the public (and the viewer) in a video in which she claims that she is innocent and is being framed for the crime only because she is brown. Her public statement points towards the widely prevalent racist trope that

identifies brown-skinned people as terrorists. Her skin tone is not incidental but is a crucial part of the narrative arc of the show.

Chopra's ethnicity in these texts is deployed to mark her as the at-once fascinating and threatening Other, connotations that resonate with those associated with her character in *Baywatch*. The threat, however, never gets out of hand in any of the three texts mentioned earlier. In these texts, Chopra's race and/or sexuality is oriented more towards entertainment and popular consumption rather than serious critique, eliminating any ideologically radical deployment of her identity as a racial and gendered Other. Chopra and her character Leeds are both examples of women of color who have been able to negotiate with the dominant system and gain affluence. Yet, certain aspects of their personality surface to make their presence within this system precarious.

In *Off-White Hollywood*, Negra (2001) has argued that an ethnic female star is readily absorbed and commodified by Hollywood as she symbolizes the myth of American pluralism and meritocratic achievement. Additionally, Negra states, she embodies the potential for "ideological disruption" as she "threatens to expose the fragile construction of white, American patriarchy" (p. 8). In a culture in which capitalism is the dominant ethic, then, meritocracy is used as the smokescreen to justify the logic of capitalism. The ethnic female star is the perfect example of the workability of this system, as she is neither white nor male. The ethnic female star, nevertheless, is not an exemplifier of meritocracy but a *randomized exception* to the inequalities spawned by capitalism, one of the lucky few that capitalism arbitrarily decides to reward with wealth.

A migrant woman's efforts to include herself in the dominant consumerist ethic of American society is a complex idea to represent in a mainstream text such as *Baywatch*. On the one hand, her ethnicity must be used as a plot device, leading to fatal outcomes; on the other hand, the myth of the "American Dream" must be kept alive by depicting her as successful and empowered. The figure of the female migrant is instrumental in creating a subtextual contrast between her home culture as limiting and fixed and the United States as a nation of endless opportunities and multicultural ethos. Chopra, in her role as Victoria Leeds, fulfills simultaneously the stereotype of the oppressed Third World migrant woman and the high-achieving, hardworking US-American immigrant. Yet the fault line of the text is exposed through her extremely violent death, wherein her body (and delinquent individuality) is torn to shreds so that her excessive ambition is not only controlled, but also destroyed.

"Fierce, fearless, flawed": performing brand "Priyanka"

In a three-part interview titled "Beneath the Surface" (2016), uploaded by the YouTube channel *Film Companion*, we are invited to visit Priyanka Chopra's New York apartment for a glimpse into the person behind the star. Chopra takes us on a guided tour of her apartment – the space unfolding before our eyes as a spectacle of her status and affluence. In part three of this interview, we become aware of the marketing logic that underpins the show: a Microsoft Surface tablet computer used in a segment where Chopra watches and then talks about scenes from her most well-known Hindi films. The star Priyanka Chopra and the gadget Microsoft Surface have certain similarities: both are famous, both have internationally recognizable brand names, and both are associated with a lifestyle of expensive consumption. In the specific context of celebrity culture, Klein (1999) has termed this "fluid partnership" between famous people and famous products "co-branding," – an interaction that enables both entities to leverage each other's brands (p. 30). This is not a simple case of a star promoting a product. In times when popular culture is saturated with celebrities and products, the two complement each other in the mutual need to be noticed and demarcate



Chopra shows the interviewer (Anupama Chopra, who has her back to the camera, no relation) her “guitar corner” (extreme left of frame) in her New York Apartment in Episode 1 of the *Beneath the Surface* interview. “I don’t know how to play,” she chuckles and adds that she wants to learn someday.



Chopra shows the interviewer her home gym.



Chopra watches a scene from one of her films on the Microsoft Surface tablet that also sponsors this interview.



Chopra speaking at the “Breaking the Glass Ceiling” event organized by the Indian news channel, NDTV.

themselves from other brands. In the interview, Chopra appears remarkably self-aware of her own brand and discusses her brand identity quite candidly.

When Chopra is asked how she views her success as a woman in Hollywood, she replies that the “exotic Indian girl” persona was an “easy business module” in the early part of her career. She expresses concern about “Bollywood’ stereotypes prevalent in Hollywood and says that she deliberately wanted to work towards dismantling the notion that she is only capable of song-and-dance and melodrama. She also mentions that she is a “princess” who does not busy herself with any household chores and cannot cook and is, therefore, not a typical eligible Indian bride. Chopra says that her staff and cook travel with her between Mumbai and New York so that her life as a transnational star is a seamless affair. Chopra, apart from *performing* stardom in this interview, also reveals her quintessential Indian class and caste privilege: a woman who will not do her own chores because she can employ people from the working class to do them for her.

Historically, stars have always functioned as brands, their name and fame used to launch and market films. McDonald (2000) has argued that stars are a “form of capital” and are used to gain advantage in the market and earn profits by commercial industries (p. 5). The foundation of the market value of the stars is their identity and recognizability as “individuated performers” (McDonald, p. 30). A star’s brand, therefore, is constructed around individuality, a notion that under neoliberal regimes of celebrity culture translates to flexible self-commodification to suit the cultural market. As Marshall (1997) has pointed out, individuality is one of the “ideological mainstays” (p. 635) of consumer capitalism, a context within which stars and celebrities operate as “highly organized cultural commodities” (p. 634). However, what is most attractive about the star is that she seemingly exists outside the realm of commodification as a creative individual, constantly changing and enacting creativity of the self. This pattern shows itself in the stardom and branding of Chopra, who presents herself as someone who has become a celebrity only after a relentless investment in herself, her star image, and her craft.

In another public appearance in 2018 for a talk on the topic “Breaking the Glass Ceiling,” organized by the Indian news channel *NDTV* (also available on YouTube), Chopra describes herself as “fierce, fearless, and flawed.” She goes on to outline a twelve-step program that can empower young people to achieve their own dreams and “become Priyanka Chopra.” This list includes catchphrases such as “make choices,” “be greedy,” and “take risks.” She confesses that it was not her intention to break any kind of glass ceiling in her career, but that she only wanted to “chase her dreams.” Chopra’s stardom, in her own words, is a journey of continuous self-invention and of molding her persona to suit the demands of the entertainment market.

Chopra’s self-driven journey to success displays an affinity to the neoliberal understanding of atomized self-invention and enterprise. Gill and Shraff (2011) have argued that the neoliberal subject is gendered as a woman, encouraged to think of herself as an “autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject” who functions as if she is unaffected by “any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves” (p. 7). Although Chopra refers to instances where she was discriminated against as a woman on film sets in India, she omits the fact that this is a systemic problem in the industry that female stars collectively face. Chopra’s “twelve-step program” advice is based on the presumption that any woman can easily follow these steps and become as successful as her, without referring to her own social privileges. In this neoliberal self-identification, individualism remains a free-floating ethic that anyone can strap on to their personality and precludes any grounding in social, political or economic contexts.



The picture of Chopra with Indian PM Narendra Modi for which she was trolled. Modi supporters criticized Chopra for not wearing a traditional dress and for showing her legs to the PM and called it a sign of disrespect.

A female star such as Chopra, nevertheless, still exists within the contradictions of a capitalistic economy which disassembles traditional hierarchies but does not radically alter social and cultural mores. In the context of contemporary India, conservative values dictate women's public and private behavior, causing friction between the neoliberal ethic of individuality and dominant values regarding gender and sexuality. I use a highly publicized instance to illustrate how Chopra's star brand clashes with majoritarian views about how ideal Indian women must behave and present themselves in public. In 2017, Priyanka Chopra was trolled for posting a photo on Instagram where she is seen with the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi. In the picture, she was wearing a knee-length dress instead of traditional Indian attire, and commenters shamed her for "exposing her legs" to the Prime Minister. Days later Chopra posted another picture of her mother and herself, both posing in short dresses with the caption "Legs for days." Via her cheeky reply, Chopra, without naming anyone specifically, managed to rebuke Modi followers and trolls. Her tweet was a push back against their sexist attitudes towards Indian womanhood and (by including her mother in the shot) their favored trope of deifying motherhood.

Despite her self-assured response to the trolls, the backlash received by Chopra for her picture with Modi exposes cracks in the ideology of "choice" that she regards as an asset she possesses as a modern Indian woman. Chopra's definition of choice, however, is imbricated within discourses of neoliberalism, wherein choice often applies only to empowerment within the commodity market. Chopra's celebrity demonstrates the logic behind the apparent egalitarianism of the capitalist system: continuous labor and self-promotion is eventually rewarded. Yet, as King (2010) has explained, this is a form of tokenism specific to capitalism, in which "certain individuals [are selected] from subaltern categories to prove that anything is possible" (p. 17). This selection process, however, is not completely random and rewards only those who are willing to conform to the narrative of "creative" individualism – an endless process of recycling the self to maintain a state of relevance in the market.

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“Nickyanka”: the ultimate celebrity brand



A photograph from Chopra and Jonas' Hindu wedding ceremony at Umaid Bhavan Palace in Jodhpur in the Indian state of Rajasthan.



Chopra and her husband, Nick Jonas, at their engagement ceremony in Mumbai, India. A “couples’ logo” comprising of a graphic of their combined initials can be seen in the background.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi attends the Chopra-Jonas wedding reception in Mumbai, India.

On December 1, 2018 Chopra married boyband member, solo recording artist, and actor Nick Jonas in an elaborate multi-day wedding ceremony. Even months after their wedding, social media was inundated with pictures curated from the lavish ceremonies, posted on Instagram by various attendees, the press, and Chopra and Jonas themselves. Their wedding was so high profile that even the Indian Prime Minister attended one of their reception parties.

After their wedding, Chopra and Jonas were named “Nickyanka” by the press in the popular tradition of referring to celebrity couples by a “portmanteau name” to indicate their combined cultural value and power (Cobb and Ewen, 2015, p. 1). [\[open endnotes and references in new window\]](#) Diaz (2015) has argued, in the case of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, how the blending of their names into “Brangelina” was instrumental in rebranding the couple as a “new, marketable, celebrity entity” (p. 278).

Chopra and Jonas, as a couple, also demonstrate this rebranding: for instance, in the wedding-related videos that the couple recorded for elite fashion magazine *Vogue* (available on YouTube). In one of these videos, Chopra dances to one of Jonas’ hit songs. The visuals resemble a music video, where Jonas is seen strumming a guitar and singing in one corner of a room with Chopra dancing on a stage in the center, changing her outfit thrice. These videos, then, represent the coming together not only of Chopra and Jonas’ combined brand as a couple, but also of three mega brands – Priyanka, Nick and *Vogue* – each one contributing to the other’s brand value.

In a post-wedding public appearance in India, Chopra was seen wearing a *mangalsutra* and *sindoor*, traditional markers for women that identify them as



Chopra striking a pose while dancing to Jonas' song "Close" in a music video sponsored by the fashion magazine, *Vogue*.



Jonas strums the guitar as Chopra performs in the *Vogue* music video.



Chopra and Jonas photographed at an event in Mumbai soon after their wedding. A line of the traditional *sindoor* is visible in the part of her hair and she wears an elaborate *mangalsutra* in her neck.

married. When called out for being a “pseudo-feminist” on Twitter for changing her last name and wearing *sindoor*, Chopra responded by saying that her definition of feminism is that women should be free to do what they like. Chopra reframes tradition as individual choice and willingly participates in the assertion of gendered hierarchies in the heteronormative marriage. As Kapur (2009) has argued, this is part of a larger trend of ostentatious weddings in neoliberal India, in which members of a transnational elite seek to combine tradition and modern conveniences and view the practice of wedding-related patriarchal conventions as an expression of personal style. Kapur has explained that conspicuous consumption in this Great Indian (Hindu) Wedding

“is symptomatic of a neoliberal subject governed by a regime of consumption where, in order to show that one has ‘arrived,’ every event, including something as conformist as a wedding, must be presented as uniquely individual” (p. 94).

Yet, as an article written soon after the Chopra-Jonas wedding in the online magazine *The Cut* revealed, this alliance and its spectacular, highly mediated performance did achieve some degree of scandal. Mariah Smith, in her opinion piece about the marriage (an article that was later taken down after massive backlash about its racist and sexist overtones), called Chopra a “global scam artist” who had tricked Jonas into an extravagant wedding and a “life sentence” of a marriage. According to Smith, Chopra had ulterior motives of furthering her career in Hollywood by marrying Jonas. Smith also critiqued Chopra’s “indulgent” celebrity lifestyle and her sexual autonomy by bringing up rumors of earlier relationships.[1] Apart from the fact that Smith is clearly unaware that Chopra was a film star even before she married Jonas, the writer creates a narrative of panic and fear about the older brown woman marrying a young, impressionable white American man.

In the self-aware positioning of her ethnicity in Hollywood and her “Indianness” in the Indian context, Chopra displays a hard to pin-down star brand that encapsulates the constant and rapid change demanded by neoliberalism. Additionally, Chopra’s stardom brings into relief the contradictions of neoliberal culture: the conditionality of freedom and choice, the precarity of upward mobility, and the exclusivity of success. Her ability to travel across the world with ease and switch between two entertainment industries is a result of her affluence and class privilege. Yet, we know well-enough that women working in commercial film industries (such as the Hindi film industry and Hollywood) are consistently censured and marginalized when they display high degrees of personal and professional autonomy. This is what makes Chopra a fascinating film star and media celebrity: her career is shaped by the continuous self-invention necessary in a media industry that seeks novelty, especially in its female stars; however, her conformity to this paradigm is also what, counterintuitively, makes her seem unconventional, exceptional, or even transgressive, in certain contexts.

When is a star not a star?: citizen, immigrant, celebrity

In 2017, Chopra hosted the annual Global Citizen Festival in New York. Global Citizen is a platform that uses internationally famous celebrities such as Chopra to



Chopra at the Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh in 2017. She visited the Rohingya refugee camps also to create awareness about girls' health and education.



Chopra's controversial appearance on the cover of Condé Nast magazine, for which she apologized later.

promote various social causes that affect our world on a global scale. As part of her campaign as a “global citizen” and a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, Chopra visited Rohingya refugees in camps in Bangladesh. Since the Indian state is engaged in a political conflict of its own with Bangladesh over issues of immigration, Chopra’s act was met with excoriation from nationalist factions in India. In another instance, Chopra had to apologize when she appeared on the cover of Condé Nast magazine in a t-shirt with a message that was considered offensive. The t-shirt showed a list of four words – “refugee, immigrant, outsider, traveler” – out of which all except the last were crossed out. Criticism centered on the fact that Chopra was privileged and, thus, could claim to be a “traveler” whereas the other identities are often imposed on the powerless.

A transnational celebrity such as Chopra exists on what Meeuf and Raphael (2013) have termed “contact zones” of nations and cultures in global capitalist economies. Although Meeuf and Raphael argue that these contact zones can obscure “the constructs of nation or the inequalities of global capitalism” (p. 3), I suggest that, conversely, these can also be zones of rupture where these differences are more than obvious. The controversies surrounding Chopra in cases when she is downplaying her situatedness as an Indian citizen make this apparent, even as they reveal her privilege. It is only too evident in the way our world works today that the words “citizen” and “immigrant” function very differently for those who are without the power and resources that someone such as Chopra can take for granted.

In her interviews, Chopra often refers to her jet-setting lifestyle and how she spends life on an airplane. She has referred to herself as “nomadic” on *The Wendy Williams Show*, adding that she continuously shuttles between countries for work. Szeto (2011) has used the term “cosmopolitical” in her study of Chinese directors who have been successful in Hollywood, arguing that their engagement with multiple geopolitical locations is based on strategies that are “not essentialist” and “include a variety of encounters, negotiations, and affiliations” (p. 2). She defines the cosmopolitical as a “transnational, interactive, and complex emergent identity and consciousness” (Szeto, p. 6). In Szeto’s view, the cosmopolitical is a transgressive identity that undermines an individual’s situatedness within a nation-state. Additionally, it is also a survival strategy, useful for those who are “resilient and inventive” to navigate a “global media landscape” (Szeto, p. 6).

Although Chopra fits the definition of a cosmopolitical, I want to emphasize how much this identity, this seeming liminality is in the service of a capitalistic celebrity culture. More significantly, Chopra’s transnational celebrity has emerged amid a worldwide resurgence of nationalism, particularly championed by neoliberal governments such as that of India. Chopra’s celebrity is transnational, yet her identity is defined by the indelible markings of citizenship, nationality and race. Although Chopra can claim to use her ethnic identity as a marketable aspect of her stardom in Hollywood, she also finds herself in situations where her ethnicity and nationality make her conspicuous and, thus, subject to criticism from chauvinistic groups she offends with her actions.

In recent times, Chopra has emerged, among other mainstream Hindi cinema stars such as Amitabh Bachchan, Akshay Kumar and Kangana Ranaut, as an iconic and open supporter of Prime Minister Modi. In April 2020, the Prime Minister publicly thanked Chopra in a tweet in which he mentioned a donation



Chopra posted this picture of her thick passport on Twitter as an indicator of her jet-setting lifestyle.

she had made to the PM Cares Fund, a charitable trust created by Modi specially for coronavirus relief in India. This fund has come under increased scrutiny since it was launched during the pandemic for its opacity in terms of how donation money is being collected and used. Commentators have criticized the fund for being yet another publicity stunt by the Modi government, even as millions in donations pour in from Chopra, her husband Nick Jonas, and other celebrities.

Chopra was once again excoriated for being a hypocrite when she posted on Instagram in support of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd in the United States. She wrote about how Floyd was a victim of police brutality, adding, “NO ONE deserves to die, especially at the hands of another because of their skin color.” Chopra was called out for remaining silent on police brutality in India, which played out horrifically during the wave of protests that surged in India in late 2019 against a bigoted citizenship law, the Citizenship Amendment Act.[2]



Chopra's Instagram post on Black Lives Matter and George Floyd's death.

Chopra's star-brand, despite its careful construction, plays out in starkly oppositional ways, wherein she can respond to Modi supporters in a “feminist” post reclaiming her right to dress the way she wants (as in the “legs for days” example) and endorse the increasingly fascist ways of the Modi government. Within the forging of her star-persona, these two strains of political thought, which are otherwise irreconcilable, merge without apparent contradiction. As a result, she can present herself as standing for racial justice and gender equality, while also supporting a regime that is built on Hindu fundamentalism and the suppression of minority rights in India.

In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1994), Debord has stated that spectacle, in capitalist societies, is the “opposite of dialogue” (p. 17). Stardom, according to Debord, forms a subset of the realm of the spectacle, and celebrity lifestyles are constructed to seem accessible to everyone. However, as Debord explains, what we see of celebrity lives are only “by-products” of their labor (which are power and leisure), projected above labor to appear as the main goal of stardom (p. 39). While inhabiting the realm of the spectacle, the star “renounces all autonomy” to conform to the dominant order, thus betraying her ordinariness over her supposed individuality (p. 39). The loss of autonomy for Chopra, the inability to maintain a genuine sense of individuality is brought into focus if we compare her

with other contemporary female actors working in Hindi cinema, such as Swara Bhasker and Richa Chaddha, who openly express their censure of the Indian government on their social media handles. Not only are these women trolled mercilessly by Modi supporters, they also do not fit into an identifiable brand as stars. However, there is no visible contradiction within their personal politics, as there often is in the case of Chopra. The spectacle of Priyanka Chopra's stardom is, thus, inherently unstable, so that when she is asked to take a position as a person, not as a star, her persona falls through as the person is revealed and struggles to conform.

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Notes

1. Although the original article was deleted, I have referenced other online sources for screenshots and quotes from the article.

2. The Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) was passed by the Indian government in December 2019. The act, using religion as a basis to grant citizenship to illegal immigrants who were fleeing persecution in their home countries, singled out Muslims as ineligible to claim refugee-status in India. The induction of the bill in parliament and its subsequent passing was met with country-wide and overseas protests that called for rescinding the Act that incorporated blatant discriminatory and anti-Muslim language. The protests, many that involved university students, dissented against the authoritarian rule of the Modi government and focused on the Hindu fundamentalism of the ruling party.

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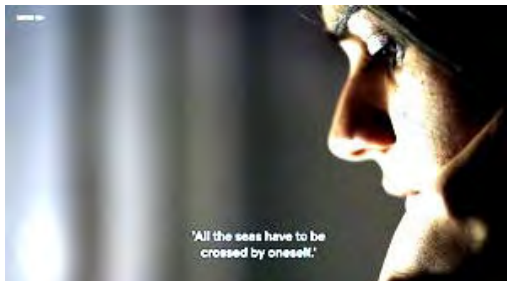
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Poster for *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (Life is a Garden).



Kashaf's "appropriate" dressing.



Kashaf finds herself alone in the tough journey called life. She feels she has to endure all the hardships alone.

Pakistani women and the “Other”: a study of *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*

by [Sonal Vij](#)

Television, especially now, with its overarching presence on Over the Top (OTT: directly streaming) online platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and so on, has a broad audience. Nowadays, not just films and television, but online series are responsible for shaping cultural ideologies and playing a significant role in representations as TV creates “a space for expression and debate over values within cultures and across cultural boundaries.” (Sharma, R., & Savory, C. A. 2014) [[open references in new page](#)] Also, TV constitutes a vantage point to analyze the elaboration and diffusion of an ideological position concerning how social relations and political problems are defined. It also gives the scholar an insight into the production and transformation of dominant perspectives that circulate in society. In particular, television becomes a site of the construction of cultural and gender identities.

Through content analysis of one television series, I posit some contradictory ways that although television offers a global background for questioning social constructs like gender, it also becomes a vehicle for dominant ideology. This essay is a case study of one of the most popular Pakistani-produced television soap operas—*Zindagi Gulzar Hai*—here used to analyze the representation of gender relations in popular Pakistani (produced) television. Hopefully this close study of *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* will shed new light on some common but little-recognized issues of gender inequality that still lie behind this “realistic” portrayal of contemporary Pakistani society.

Zindagi Gulzar Hai (trans. Life is a Garden) was first aired in India on Zee Entertainment Enterprise's newly launched channel, Zindagi. The advertisement for this channel emphasized the phrase “*Jodey Dilon ko*” (Connecting Hearts), to highlight a new initiative to air Pakistani soaps and serials for Indian audiences. *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (hereafter ZGH) began airing in India from 23 June 2014 (Bhattacharya & Nag, 2016) and was aired twice on popular demand. The script imagined the possibility for peaceful reconciliation between the two political rivals, India and Pakistan, by offering “*sarhad paar ki kahaaniyaan*” (stories from across the border) to Indian audiences. (Pant, 2019). I have chosen ZGH because of its immense popularity. At the moment, ZGH is also available on the OTT platform—Netflix. Over the years, OTT platforms have become more powerful due to their reach, that is, their capacity to go beyond cultural and physical boundaries. The drama thus occupies a significant space in “cultural diplomacy” with its overwhelming popularity and continued life on pay-for-view websites.

Narratives of oppression

In ZGH, a key sequence propels the narrative. A tensely cut sequence between



Kashaf's mother Rafia with broken slippers in her hand. It's the end of the month, and the family cannot afford even the necessities.



Rafia walks bare feet as she cannot afford new slippers.



Kashaf questions her mother: "Why all men are like that (selfish)?"



Rafia cries when Murtaza (Kashaf's father) refuses to take any responsibility for Kashaf and her sisters.

Murtaza (Kashaf's father) and his daughter (Kashaf, the heroine) summarize their troubled relationship. Murtaza wants his first wife—Kashaf's mother, Rafia—to vacate the house. He's doing this because Kashaf has refused to marry a man (her cousin) of her father's choice. Earlier Murtaza had abandoned Rafia and her three daughters and remarried when Kashaf's mother could not bear a male child.

In terms of background, we must consider the importance of a male child in the South Asian context. The male child takes the family name forward. In addition, daughters and unmarried women are considered a burden as they will not necessarily work and earn money. Also, many girl children are killed at birth because parents feel that they will have to find a suitable match for their daughters, who do not provide for the family, and the families must also give dowries when the girls get married. Most important, however, women do not perpetuate the family name. The series' title, "Life is a Garden," is heavily ironic because it presents so many sequences of strife and dysfunctional familial relationships, especially for women. True to the melodramatic tradition, it appears to speak to women and articulate women's suffering at the hands of patriarchal culture—deadbeat dads, bossy brothers, and overbearing husbands.

Kashaf's father Murtaza lives with his new family with a male son, Kashaf's stepbrother Hamad. Showing the least responsibility financially and socially towards his first wife and three girls, Murtaza tries to assert his socially accepted male right to decide that Kashaf should marry his brother's son. When Kashaf refuses, Murtaza chooses to evict them. The mother Rafia, who leads a hand-to-mouth existence, pleads with Murtaza not to take do this. Thus in Episode 6, there is a powerful sequence consisting of Kashaf, Rafia, and Murtaza which shows the family dynamic.

Kashaf says to Rafia,

"Stop pleading, mom; why don't you get it? This man is neither your husband nor our father...he is a self-centered human being."

She says so because Kashaf has seen her mother provide for them and not her father. Kashaf and her sisters study as well as earn money by giving lessons. Murtaza stares at Kashaf in anger. The mother tries to pacify everyone. She says to Kashaf, "Go inside! Go inside, Kashaf!" Murtaza gets up from the chair in anger and looks at Kashaf, and raises his index finger. He cannot stand that his daughter has raised her voice and talked back. Rafia continually tries to remind Murtaza that his first wife and children are also his responsibility. She emphasizes that girls should also have monetary rights as she has long urged Murtaza for financial help. However, Murtaza keeps finding more excuses to abandon them. He says to Rafia, "These are the children whose rights you are talking about?" There is a close up of Rafia bursting into tears and she closes her eyes tightly. Though Murtaza has been absent throughout the Kashaf's upbringing, he now blames Rafia that she hasn't taught the children courtesy as Kashaf dares raise her voice in front of him. His ego is hurt as he says to Rafia,

"These children do not have the right upbringing ... and manners about how to address their father!"

Kashaf is the protagonist in ZGH. Despite all the hardships—monetary,



Murtaza (Kashaf's father) with his second wife discussing Kashaf.



Hamad, Kashaf's step-brother.



Kashaf informs her mother that Murtaza has gone on a vacation with his new family .



Rafia's reaction when she comes to know that Murtaza refused to pay for repairs for the house but has taken his other family for a vacation to Muree.

emotional, and physical—she has a scholarship and goes to university every day, changing various busses in extreme weather conditions. She is confident that her education will reap benefits someday. She is vocal about her feelings towards her father. Kashaf says to Murtaza,

"I am not asking for my rights...and even if I do have any claims on you, I forgo them. I feel it is beneath me to ask a selfish man like you for anything."

Murtaza cannot stand such strong words from his daughter, so he verbally attacks Kashaf and her mother. He says,

"If you are that arrogant, tell your mother not to keep calling me for help. If you are so independent, then why don't you solve your problems yourself"

Kashaf is tired of Murtaza ignoring her, her mother, and sisters. She is consumed by her mother's having to beg Murtaza for help. Kashaf argues,

"Now, my sister and my mother will not bother you again. As it is, except for giving is more grief, what can you do for us?"

In Pakistan, the rules governing marriage, family, inheritance, and divorce—most of which pertain to women—are considered the domains of religious authorities; thus, when women raise their voices regarding any of these laws, they in fact confront religious clergy and the established order (Rouse, 1996; Fatima 2018). When Murtaza considers that Kashaf lacks *tameez* (manners) and remarks that no one will marry her, he reflects an attitude common in traditional patriarchal culture that woman is devoid of any individuality outside marriage. In turn, Kashaf resists marriage. She says,

"If getting married means living with someone as selfish as you and leading a life as my mother does, I wish I never get married. If mom got an education and became self-sufficient, then so will we. We can lead a good and respectable life without depending on you."

Education means empowerment and a threat to the ongoing male dominance, so Murtaza attacks Kashaf's decision to acquire education. He says,

"You have acquired this arrogance by reading a few books. Its significance will become apparent when you wander from pillar to post trying to carve out a meager existence like your mother."

Urdu dramas

The sequence I describe above is one of the most powerful sequences in this Pakistani television series. Based on the novel by Umera Ahmed by the same name, the series (directed by Sultana Siddiqui) revolves around the story of a lower-middle-class girl, Kashaf, and Zarun, a wealthy man from the upper class. Urdu dramas, which are about 25 episodes, have been an important part of Pakistani television broadcasting, first on public television and, since the liberalization of television broadcasting in 2002, on cable and satellite television (C&S TV) (Désoulières 1999; Kothari 2005; Dutoya, 2018). Some recent Pakistani dramas go further, explicitly addressing "women's issues" such as child marriage, polygamy, violence, right to education, or preference for having boys. (Dutoya, 2018). As Iram Qureshi (2020) remarks,

"These stories of Pakistani dramas uphold traditional religious and

middle-class values in modern urban settings and are described by the various women one has described as being intensely relatable. The kind of fiction one can't get anywhere else has characters one can recognize in real life.”

Since many Pakistani dramas orbit around romantic tales in heterosexual context and also around family issues, it is no surprise that women are frequently at the center of the narratives (Qureshi K, 2020). Though a Pakistani drama, in ZGH, the language is a mix of Urdu and Hindi—once known as Hindustani (Bhattacharya & Nag, 2016; Bhaskar & Allen, 2009). Therefore, it is easily understood by an Indian audience as well.



Kashaf travelling in a bus while going to college.



The elders in the family object to Rafia's decision to send her daughter Kashaf to the university to study. They feel offended as they haven't been consulted.

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Shahrukh Khan with Kohl in his eyes in *Raes* (2017).



Burka Alia Bhatt plays a Muslim girl in the film *Raazi* (2019).



Othering

Women have long been defined in relation to a man. Visual narratives may add to perception about gender construction and or use some level of deconstruction. Images use language as a kind of nonverbal correlation and create a space for the cultural articulation of constellations of feelings inside societies and across social limits. In particular, visual narratives can delineate “otherness,” which is “a fundamental category of human thought” (Beauvoir 1949). In ZGH’s narrative trajectory and reception, there are two main otherings.

First, in relation to a man, all the key female characters in the drama become the other:

“She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute—she is the “Other.” (Beauvoir, 1949).

Second, for the Indian audience, Pakistani people become the “other.” It is crucial to understand the political context of how Pakistani people become the “other” for Indian audiences. The partition of the subcontinent into two—India and Pakistan (in 1947)—created wounds in the hearts of the communities—Hindu, Muslim, and Sikhs. Millions were killed and uprooted. As a result, two countries that were one, with shared cultural histories, now have hostile relations. There have been government policies in place to restrict the cultural and human flow on both sides.

Also, there is both media regulation and the fact that the images, characters, and representations of Pakistanis perpetuated in Indian media and films have been negative and stereotypical. Indian cinema has a conventional repertoire of depictions of Muslim women and men. In Bollywood cinema, Muslim/ Pakistani men usually wear *surma* (Kohl for eyes) and a cap. Women typically wear a burqa. The representation orbits around religious places like mosques.

“The broadcasters at Zindagi capitalized on this lack of a realistic representation of the Pakistani identity in Indian media and attempted to initiate cross-border communication through the syndication of Pakistani dramas in India.” (Pant, 2019).

ZGH broke that pattern of old-fashioned Muslim imagery. Through ZGH, it was probably the first time that the Indian audience experienced a different portrayal of the “other.” In contrast to Indian films and TV,

“...these serials manage to provide a matter of fact representation of Pakistani lives, as Muslim people dealing with issues of class, gender, social and familial struggle ranging from the upper-class section to the lowest strata of their society.” (Bhattacharya & Nag, 2016).

Regimes of representation

Like other visual narratives, although ZGH forms “the conditions of existence of a cultural politics designed to challenge, resist and, where possible, to transform the dominant regimes of representation” (Hall, 1996), [\[open references in new page\]](#)

Rishi Kapoor in the film *Mulk* (2018) with long beard and cap.



Muslim representation in the film *Raazi* (2018).



Zarun's girlfriend and ex-fiance: Zarun doesn't appreciate this way of dressing for his wife but it's 'okay' for a girlfriend to dress in western attire.



A typical dinner scene at Zarun's house where women wear non-traditional clothes.

in the end, it adheres to hegemony. ZGH raises questions about male children's preference, polygamy, women unwanted since birth, fragile male ego, right to education, calling out to irresponsible men, abuse, violence, and so on, but in the end it normalizes the traditional roles of women. To explore those contradictions, I am interested in examining the portrayals of women in ZGH, paying particular attention to their representation in the roles of love interests, wives, mothers, especially in the context of their position in society. These scripted roles and their visual presentation convey values and issues such as sacrifice, strength, family, sexuality, and femininity.

"Feminists argue that this politics of cultural media is gendered, and the construction of women in the media is a political act and is indicative of unequal power relations" (Fatima, 2018).

The ZGH drama was marketed and presented as pro-women, fighting stereotypes and practices that harm women. This could have been a smart marketing strategy where one expects a fight against the "naturalization of sex, gender" (Jagger, 2007). In the case of ZGH, Sanam Saeed, who plays the lead role, says, "I like characters that can be role models for young girls, roles that can help change people's perspective." (The Express Tribune, 2014). Through my analysis, I conclude that though ZGH has been promoted as a pro-woman, modern woman, and pro-liberation, the women characters finally succumb to hegemonic representations, especially about an ideal/correct/new woman in South Asian (mainly Pakistani) society. Through my analysis, I prove that these "unsettled" women find refuge in men who rescue them and make domesticity a priority. I investigate what this new emerging woman is and how it's thought she should be.

Methodology speaking, I have taken characters, plots, themes, and dialogue into consideration in this textual analysis. I have also borrowed the concept of the emergence of a "new woman" in Pakistani society (Dutoya, 2018), but I conclude that even this new woman ends up reinforcing existing inequalities and conventionality. Contrary to the marketing strategy, for women one still finds "conditioned" adherence to gender conformity and "compulsory heterosexuality"; there's still an and absence of full empowerment in "actualities of the everyday of people's embodied living." (Smith, 1999 p.73)

Framing the female body

The *izzat* (honor) of the family resides in the body of a woman. Men have asserted control over political and economic power even within the household.

"If the female body is not necessarily always excluded within this problematic, it must always be placed within quotation marks. For it is precisely the massive reading, writing, filming of the female body which constructs and maintains a hierarchy along the lines of a sexual difference assumed as natural" (Doane, 1988).

I address control by men in Pakistani society using the definition of honor by Eylem Atakav:

"Honor is typically perceived to be residing in the body and sexuality of women; protecting this honor and policing female activities relating to marriage, sexuality or love are perceived to be the primary roles of the male or the male members of a family or a community. This idea of regulating women's lives, experiences, and sexuality are common in patriarchal discourses surrounding a society" (2015).

The liberties that some of the female characters demand—freedom to have male friends, to dress as one's wish, to have a life outside the family—are constructed



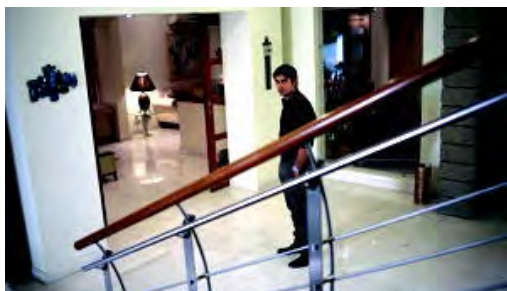
A typical dinner at Kashaf's house where women dress more "appropriately."



Zarun scolds his sister Sara for coming home late.



Sara questioning Zarun and replying that he too came late.



Zarun is angry because Sara has said that rules should be the same for men and women and she dismisses him.

within the ZGH script as irrational whims or errors, the consequences of which are severe on women and their families. For example, frequently the male authority figures explicitly make clear that a woman should not dress in a manner that attracts attention from the opposite sex. Therefore, the men take it upon themselves to set the women right and assert control over how they dress—the more covered, the better.

In upper-class society, women are more westernized. In Zarun's family household, for example, his sister Sara wears casual jeans and tops, make-up and the women don't have their heads covered. The men in the family object to Sara's dressing style. As a consequence, Zarun, the liberal class's supposed voice in the series, supports his father Junaid when his father reprimands his sister Sara to wear "proper" clothes. Here, "proper" means the woman should be fully clothed. Sara's bare arms should not be exposed, and she shouldn't wear tight-fitting clothes or any attire that exposes her body or gets attention from the opposite sex. Junaid and his son Zarun want to assert their self-acquired right to comment on how a woman should dress. In Episode 3, for example, Sara leaves for a concert wearing a sleeveless top, and Junaid says, "one shouldn't wear that which makes one look indecent." However, Sara dismisses her father's remarks and goes to the concert as she wishes. The same night there is a discussion at the dinner table where Zarun's mother, Ghazala, says that Zarun and Junaid should not have confronted Sara over her dressing. Soon, Sara is metaphorically punished for her ways, including her way of dressing, because her husband divorces her, sending a clear message that a liberal woman cannot be a good homemaker.

Zarun's mother at many points becomes the "narrative of resistance." (Krier, 1995). Ghazala champions women's rights and rebels, saying that she will not train her daughter "to be under her husband's foot!" To counter this, Zarun becomes an "official figurehead." He supports his father and says, "Even I think that a woman should be properly dressed." Zarun goes to the extent of warning when Sara is about to get married, she should be all the more careful about how she conducts herself, including her mode of dressing. In traditional discourses of honor, the vision of a Pakistani woman's sexuality is that she must be protected from the outside world where a woman is at risk. The reputation and shame of the household's females aren't just a matter of their individual being but affect the kin and community as a whole. (Fatima, 2018) "*Naukar Kya Sochenge?*" (What will servants think?) Zarun also complains to his sister for coming home late post-midnight. He tells her,

"I am a man. I can come home late, but you are a girl. Imagine what people will say."

Sara exerts her female agency by living the way she wants. No matter how obsessed or irrational the men are, women are supposed to adjust to them. Those like Sara who do not conform to this are labeled "immature."

Towards the series' end, the same Sara who used to stay out late at night, went to concerts, and was in control of her life now buckles. Initially, she doesn't do household chores and also doesn't know how to sew a button. She is reprimanded continuously for her liberal outlook. Once she gets married to Farhan, someone whom she had dated, she is expected to change. The same man who was okay with Sara being the way she suddenly finds her "irresponsible, stubborn" (episode 12).



Sara dresses in loose fitting clothes after she "matures" post her divorce. She has stopped wearing western clothes now and decides to get married in a conservative family.



Kashaf's final marital bliss with Zarun and their children.



Kashaf playing with her and Zarun's children.



Unlike Asmara and Sara, Kashaf is fully clothed even on a beach. She is out only with one man

Sara calls "freedom" her fundamental right (episode 13). However, Farhan disagrees and sees it as his responsibility to check her. Women's decision-making is questioned continuously, and post-marriage, Farun objects to Sara meeting her male friends.

Standards are different for men and women. But a woman is unchaste if she hangs out with men other than her husband. As a result of such conflicts, Sara's first marriage falls apart. Farhan legitimizes his dominance as he urges Zarun to make his sister understand and then tells her mother to talk to Sara, who supports Sara's freedom. The importance of self-sacrifice is clearly stated in ZGH when Sara later reflects on her marriage's failure, saying that she gave herself too much importance (episode 22). Finally, even Ghazala's support for Sara is discouraged. Sara finally blames her mother for the divorce and says that all men aren't liberal like her father, and Ghazala could have stopped Sara from getting a divorce by not prioritizing her freedom.

As Fatima (2018) says,

"By making marriage the 'issue,' the other aspects of a woman's life (like education, childhood, nutrition, maternal health, spiritual health other than religion), are deemed as non-existent and hence 'non-issues.'"

Too much freedom seems unsuitable for women. Sara goes into a deep depression after her first marriage is over, and after visiting various psychiatrists, she still doesn't get better. The ultimate medicine is marriage. Solitude is no option for Pakistani women. In episode 22, Sara regrets what went wrong in the first marriage. Sara says, "I gave preference to my likes and dislikes (and that was a mistake)." Her way of dressing has changed. She is now wearing a loose suit instead of jeans and tops that she used to wear before. She is willing to compromise in her marriage. Knowingly, she decides to get married into a conservative family, and Zarun calls this "maturity."

Zarun, one of the key protagonists of ZGH, is initially engaged to his childhood friend Asmara. Asmara belongs to the same upper-class society as Zarun does and is similar in habits to his sister and mother. Zarun cannot stand it if another man stares at or comments on his woman because the woman isn't dressed decently enough. "The clothes should reflect domestication" (Fenwick, 2011). A woman is rejected if she is an "unveiled woman who is confident and no longer self-conscious of her exposed body." (Ghorbankarimi, 2015 p.25) If she dresses in western attire, she should wear loose-fitting clothes, with blouses that have full sleeves and cover the hips. In episode 5, Asmara—Zarun's best friend and fiancé then—wears a sleeveless top to college. Zarun thinks women invite harassment if they do not cover themselves adequately (episode 6). "She is a bad woman who needs to be monitored and controlled." (Qureshi, 2016). He can't stand his life partner being so open-minded. His doubts about Asmara become more apparent once he changes and becomes more possessive, but Asmara constantly contradicts Zarun and remains independent in her thinking.

Freedom for women becomes problematic and punitive. In itself, the term *feminism* is avoided, and the only time it is mentioned in ZGH, it is in a negative light. In episode 10, we see Zarun discussing feminism while writing in his diary and expressing his skepticism: 'Why should a woman who does not make any compromise and cries louder than a man be liberated? And how can I stop Asmara [his fiancée at the time] from becoming such a woman?' (Dutoya, 2018).

(her husband) in contrast to Asmara and Sara.



Asmara telling Zarun how she feels suffocated because he has a problem with her being liberal.



Zarun's reaction to Asmara arguing for her freedom.



Zarun's and Asmara's engagement



Zarun scolds Asmara because he thinks she has dressed inappropriately.

In episode 10, Zarun wonders if Asmara will be a good wife, or will she be a wife like his sister Sara, who is liberal in her outlook and talks back to her husband. Zarun seems to suggest that there is a difference between “friend” material and “wife” material. He finally finds Asmara too “headstrong” and “liberal” to be his wife. He doesn't like the kind of freedom that women like Asmara, his sister, or his mother practice. In episode 13, Zarun is vocal about his demands upon Asmara:

"I don't like women who act too liberal, and you have always known this, and I don't like any girl to get up and go with just any guy, anywhere...If you consider this slavery, then I really can't say anything because this isn't very wise...I wouldn't say I like it when you meet people that I don't like."

In the end, she suffers because she is not able to marry the man she loves. Asmara breaks up with Zarun and has to find her happiness away from him.

Centrality of family

In this series as in many dramas on Pakistani television, women need to put everything in line with their families' needs. A woman with career aspirations has not fulfilled her duties properly. The husband, domestic chores, and children need to be the top priority even for an educated and or working woman.

“Marriage remains the only destiny for women in these dramas, and the discrimination faced by women within this institution is not unambiguously condemned.” (Dutoya, 2018)

Moreover, of the women shown to be working, there is an implicit understanding of “necessity” motivating their work instead of fulfilling a career, indicating that paid work is a means to an end and only secondary to women's primary roles as carers, wives or mothers. (Milestone and Meyer, 2012; Fatima, 2019).

ZGH villifies upper-class women for having financial autonomy that enables their



Zarun's inner thoughts "I haven't been able to understand the emancipation bit for women to date."



Kashaf's father telling his second wife, "There is no living with a woman (Rafia) who has become disobedient."



Elders in the family say, "Working women are incapable of being housewives."



Zarun and Sara's mother Ghazala is sad to know that her husband and children are not happy with her, saying she focused too much on her career.

escaping patriarchal norms. "A woman whose ambition in life is to establish her career is somehow only worthy of condemnation and the wrath of her children." (Qureshi, 2016) Ghazala (Zarun's mother) has been wrong as she has paid considerable attention to her likes, dislikes, and career. She doesn't dress traditionally, doesn't cover her head, is westernized, is elitist, goes to parties, and runs an NGO. She has servants at home, so she doesn't cook, clean, and doesn't do laundry. Repeatedly, she is reminded that she has failed as a mother and a wife. Zarun has sensed the lack of a happy relationship between his mother and father (episode 24). He feels the absence of a "real" mother despite having one. Ghazala becomes a problematic and unfulfilled character who has failed to deal with her children's feelings. It is as if working women "lose their warm qualities" (Kaplan, 2000; Fatima, 2019) and end up meeting a terrible fate if they do not recognize the importance of family.

According to her children, Ghazala has been selfish and irresponsible. Throughout the drama, Ghazala has been blamed for the failed marriage of her daughter Sara (ep. 15). In a detailed conversation in episode 22, Junaid (Zarun's father/ her husband) accuses Ghazala that the house hasn't been her top priority. Ghazala was too busy in her career and had her priorities wrong. Zarun, Sara, and Junaid also blame Ghazala for the deficient upbringing of Sara and Zarun and raising them as "confused personalities." The entire family criticizes Ghazala, saying that Zarun and Sara's childhood raising had suffered as Ghazala prioritized herself and her career. Working women characters in the series, therefore, do not enact empowerment because there is a narrative element of "retreatism" (Negra, 2009; Fatima, 2019), which keeps telling the working woman that to achieve her life's purpose, she must get back to her original duty of being a caregiver and raising a family. Her work is always portrayed as a second priority (Fatima, 2019)

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Regulating the new woman



Kashaf finds happiness ultimately in Zarun. She says, "Life is wonderful."



Zarun says that a woman should be appropriately dressed.



Fatal Attraction: Zarun is attracted to Kashaf because she knows how to 'sew' a button.

I draw the concept of "new woman" from Virginie Dutoya (2018). She cites Partha Chatterjee (1987). [\[open references in new page\]](#) According to Chatterjee, the "new woman" was the one able to balance "modernity" and "tradition" within nationalist discourses; she was educated, urban, aware of social and political issues, yet able to retain an authentic Indian (in this case, Pakistani spirit) and infuse it into her home. Dutoya further says that the "new" Muslim women were expected to participate in the uplift of their community while ensuring the maintenance of its perceived religious, social, and cultural boundaries; they had to be educated and modern homemakers, pious (but not superstitious), and socially aware. In the contemporary sense, Kashaf fits the bill. Further, the upper-class male protagonist begins to admire this new woman Kashaf for finding this "balance" between conformity and autonomy and imposing these norms on the women from his own class.

Kashaf, the "new woman," represents a cross between the pious lower class and a westernized liberal elite. "This award goes for female empowerment, for the thousands of Kashafs out there, to feminism, this award goes to you," a smiling Sanam Saeed (who plays Kashaf) exclaimed as she received the best actress award for her role in the famous serial *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (Qureshi, 2016). As Qureshi further adds:

"It is undeniable that *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* emphasizes the importance of female education. It introduces us to a character like Kashaf, who's not fragile, dependent on a man, and a self-made woman. It's also true that Kashaf takes a stand against her father and is by every means a heroine that gives Pakistani women a better example to look up to than the usual damsels-in-distress on TV whose aim in life most often is to exert their influence over the men in their house (be it brother, son or husband). However, despite these reasons, there is a lot in ZGH that furthers all the problematic things. Zarun's pursuit of the 'perfect woman' reinforces and justifies the double standards of our society when it comes to giving personal and sexual liberties to both the sexes." (2016)

"The "good" woman character is pure, chaste, and untouched." (Ghorbankarimi, 2015). She needs to be a passive supporter of the way men think. The woman needs to know her limits, she should not be vocal about feminism, should not be liberal. It is interesting to note these absences. The absences contribute as much to the plot as the presences do. Kashaf, the ideal new woman doesn't wear western clothes, doesn't talk to men much, keeps to herself, and doesn't have many friends. She is *sudhri hui* (not spoiled with foreign values), is initially hated by Zarun. Still, subconsciously, he likes her way of living. This "new woman" also keeps away from men or late night outings. As for Kashaf, the only late night outing that she has ever had is one in college. If a woman ventures outside without a male member of her family, she seems to be chasing an unchaste life.

Zarun is impressed that Kashaf is not out late at night. To be good, a woman needs to maintain her *izzat* (reputation). In episode 8, for example, Kashaf is in a fix on how to reach home after a university concert. With no woman available to drop Kashaf home, she reluctantly accepts the lift from Zarun and Asmara. In one



Zarun and Kashaf in an altercation in college.



Kashaf's admiring Zarun from a distance, liking that he has rescued her.

sequence, Kashaf, Zarun, and Asmara are in Zarun's car. She refuses to go alone with him once Zarun drops Asmara. To maintain her *laaj* (reputation), Kashaf refuses to sit in the front seat with Zarun as she is embedded with traditional values that teach her not to be near a man alone that too at night. Contrary to Sara, Kashaf cares about what people say when they see a boy dropping her home at midnight. This refusal was proof of how well she takes care of her chastity.

Despite heated arguments, Kashaf sits in the back seat of the car while he drives. To reinforce the belief, her mother tells Kashaf that she should be more careful when it comes to a man dropping Kashaf home and reminds Kashaf that it is not advisable in their set-up to have boys drop women home. Kashaf is hesitant towards being seen alone with Zarun late at night. Kashaf explains,

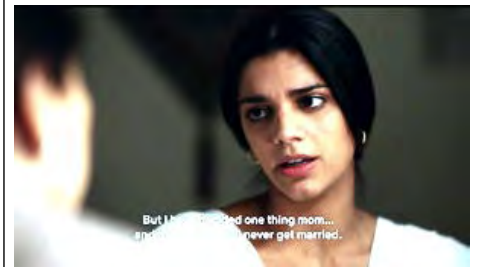
"Where I come from do you know what people would say...if they see me getting out of a strange man's car late at night? A guy dropping a girl at night may be normal for you but not for me."

Just as Zarun wants for his family, Kashaf acknowledges that rules are different for men and women. Zarun admires these values subconsciously. However, on the surface, he detests Kashaf's behavior. Disturbingly, he proposes Kashaf marry him (as she is a virgin, hasn't had a relationship, is suppressed sexually), and his proposal is portrayed as Kashaf's most significant achievement.

It is interesting to note Kashaf's views on marriage. Kashaf has been vocal about them. However, she is led to believe that it's a necessity for her, mostly because Rafia (her mother) is quite unhappy with the idea of Kashaf being unmarried.



Kashaf and her mother (Rafia) discussing marriage.



Kashaf tells her mother that she has decided that she will never get married.



Zarun and Sara's father objects to Sara wearing a sleeveless top and Sara defends herself by saying, "it's the fashion nowadays."

Kashaf says, "I don't want to get married" in episodes 5, 11, 14, and 15 quite categorically. She fears, "any man is capable of being like dad! Men are unreliable!" (episode 14) She insists that her mother can marry off her sisters Shanila and Sidra. She feels that "the root of all trouble in a woman's life is marriage" (episode 5). Kashaf fears that she would have to lead a life like her mother—unsupported and unwanted with burdens of responsibility. In episode 15, Kashaf retorts to her mother,

"I already have a house, mom. And I feel afraid at the thought of a husband! and regarding children, it's not a responsibility I want to take on."

However, despite these constant repetitions, her family makes sure that Kashaf gets married. Kashaf becomes the damsel who needs to be free from her "issues" and settle down to have a family.



The wayward sister: Sara regrets that she gave too much importance to herself in her first marriage; thus, her marriage failed.

"It's scary how seemingly, *ZGH* seems to feature women empowerment, but all it does is re-establish patriarchal norms. Kashaf is a self-made woman who strives for her education, although, ultimately, it is her marriage to Zarun which wins her approval from society; a careful reminder to women that not marrying is not a choice for them." (Qureshi, 2016)

In episode 15, Kashaf says, "I have too many issues and problems...from which I cannot find release...no matter how hard I try." The strong, confident, career-oriented, responsible, financially independent woman finds bliss in rescue by Zarun, who cures her of her "issues and complexes."



The modern: Zarun's mother Ghazala says that she will not train her daughter to be dominated by any man.



The traditional: Rafia encourages her daughter Kashaf to cook for Zarun despite domestic help being available at home.

Home as a choice

The director simplifies the heroine's real suffering, her agony over choosing between a husband she loves, and the independence of mind that she desperately needs (Naficy, 2003; Ghorbankarimi 2015). Post her marriage to Zarun—who saves her—Kashaf redescribes gender dynamics, she expects and accepts, and articulates society's dominant narrative about the structure of power and politics. She says, "I am not interested in equality of women." (episode 19) The same independent Kashaf, who was an integral part of running her family (before she got married) and career, feels relieved after her marriage. The viewer gets insight to her most intimate thoughts when she journals. She writes in her diary,

"I won't have to run around for anything ever in my life from now on...now someone else will take on that frustration." (episode 19).

Kashaf takes a backseat after marriage. The man is supposed to be the "provider," "protector," and the "head" of the family, and she happily accepts. Rather than getting offended, she leans on Zarun when he gives her money for her expenditure. She is happy being Zarun's responsibility and considers it a blessing (episode 20). There isn't even a conflict in Kashaf's mind about being not so independent anymore. As Dutoya writes:

"The homemaking skills of the heroines are not only practical (cooking, sewing, etc.); they also involve her responsibility (*zimah dari*) to hold the family together. While she is entitled to respect (*izzat*), a woman should accept that men deserve a certain "protocol" (as it is formulated by Zarun). This protocol is signified in different ways, let it be by using the formal *aap* to address her husband (while he says *tum* to her), bringing food to him, asking him before going out of the home, even for visiting her parents" (2018).



A typical evening in Zarun's family where everyone is cracking jokes and laughing vs. ...



.... Kashaf talking about hardships to her sister in the evening.



Kashaf's altercation with her father. Her working class family is suffering in poverty after the father left them.



Kashaf's stepmother is a home-maker and continuously nags her husband to divorce his first wife.

In ZGH, there is sympathy for the Kashaf's struggle when she was a lower-class woman. Then it became normalized that domestic inequities around housework and child-rearing would leave her (and women like her) exclusively burdened to balance work and the emotional violence around family life in poverty. The outspoken protagonist (Kashaf), living in genteel poverty unabashedly challenges her deadbeat father's authority but then compromises her autonomy, drawing viewers into the "pleasures" of her upward mobility through marriage. Domestic duties, wifehood, and motherhood will eventually discipline these women through the teleological plot of traditional satisfaction. (Sengupta, 2019). Women are expected to be in a more vulnerable position than men as they "should" be responsible for their children and husbands' emotional needs. (Ferguson, 2019). The man is "entitled," and his identity is rooted in the amount of control he exercises to control the woman's day-to-day life. "Women ought to be taught to serve, nurture and support men" (Ferguson, 2019), and that's what Kashaf's mother Rafia does and the ideology she propagates.

Her mother Rafia instructs Kashaf that despite available domestic help now that Kashaf is married in a higher-class family), she should cook for Zarun and take care of all his needs. That's her *farz* (duty). A good woman orbits her life around the man; she nurtures he so he can perform his gender-specific roles like being the authority figure and earning the daily bread. "Women have a central role in production and reproduction; there is no separation of productive work from home and reproductive work" (Ferguson, 2019). It is interesting to note that Zarun doesn't help Kashaf in household chores (though Kashaf works an equal number of hours as he does) even when Kashaf is pregnant, and there is no domestic help available. Kashaf succumbs to everything so that she becomes *achhi* (good) wife. Contrary to Sara and Ghazala, Kashaf does all of Zarun's house's chores on her own. She cleans bathrooms, makes sure his clothes are ready, and so on. In episode 20 and episode 21, Rafia (her mother) trains Kashaf to cook in a way that Zarun would be able to identify the taste of the food prepared by Kashaf distinctly. With no social life, Kashaf makes enough time to socialize with her mother-in-law and her husband's extended family.

The right woman should aspire to be professional but must also be an excellent home-maker. Though Kashaf has been a better student than Zarun and has a good job, Zarun doesn't admire that. Instead, he has felt almost fatal attraction when he sees that Kashaf can sew a button in a few seconds. Zarun—though he is then engaged to Asmara, who doesn't do household chores—tells his sister Sara that he will not marry anyone who can't do household chores like sewing a button (episode 5). No matter what she has accomplished in her education or work but ultimately, Kashaf's ability to sew a button attracts him. "For the first time, I have felt impressed by you" (episode 20). Throughout the series, a woman's worth is significantly measured on how much household work she does, how much she takes care of the man's errands, and how well she cooks. Her professional standing has no worth.

The good woman can resist male authority but should be willing to "compromise" even if the man doesn't. Despite Zarun being suspicious, not respecting her boundaries (for instance, checking her phone, opening her mail), he gets away with everything. Though he expects Kashaf to tell him when a male friend calls, all this while he is in touch with his ex-girl-friend Asmara and doesn't feel the need to tell Kashaf. Kashaf leaves Zarun when she thinks that he is cheating on her. Kashaf regrets getting married and is vocal about it to her mother (episode 26). But still Kashaf feels that her life is ruined without her husband. Furthermore, despite being portrayed as a strong independent woman, Kashaf cries when she knows that she is giving birth to two girls. As Ferguson (2019) says, "a woman's role as a mother places her in a more vulnerable position than the man." She fears

that she now has the same fate as her mother, raising children on her own. Because Kashaf is pregnant, it becomes her responsibility to "harmonize the conflict" (Ferguson, 2019), which she does at the expense of herself, sacrificing herself respect and her initial demand for equality. Rather than be a single mother, she decides to go back to Zarun without any clarifications or even a healthy dialogue about his behavior. She rebels but eventually succumbs.

In the last episode, there is a sequence of Zarun playing in a garden with their two girls on a sunny day. Kashaf is self-reflective while looking at her achievements on the home front. We see continuous shots of the "marital bliss." There seems to be an understanding that so far what Kashaf thought about life was wrong. She has been cured. Throughout the series, she writes that life's struggles make her unhappy, but now she finally says *Zindagi Gulzar Hai/ Life is a garden*. She confesses that she is happy being "controlled" / kept in control by her husband who rescued her. She is elated that Zarun is not obsessed with Kashaf reproducing a male heir. Domestication is the ultimate happiness for all women characters, including once a strong-headed Kashaf.

Conclusion

Through my analysis, I prove how a that drama raises various issues about women and society can have regressive elements, including a regressive ending. As per the show, happiness for a woman exists solely in adhering to a patriarchal societal structure. No matter how much women study or excel in their careers, their ultimate satisfaction lies when they please their men and assume full responsibility for a household and children, putting their likes and dislikes aside.

It is especially useful to consider the representation of a trio of female characters in the drama – Sara, Asmara, and Kashaf to show how the Kashaf emerges as the feminine ideal; she achieves autonomy in personal and professional life by conforming to socially mandated codes of dress, deportment and "values." The other two more westernized women failed to fulfill their romantic destinies—Sara has a failed marriage while Asmara does not get the man she loves, Zarun, who is attracted to Kashaf and marries her.

In ZGH, women need to put everything in line when their family needs them. Society punishes the women who do not conform to the dominant paradigm and male supremacy and do not comply with the conventional patriarchal structure. However, some of the female characters in the drama question traditional



Sara is depressed after her failed marriage.



Ghazala (Zarun's and Sara's mother) consoling Sara.

patriarchal structure. At the same time, other women "improve" and supposedly "mature." The show is very clear about women's future—those who adhere to the conventional patriarchal norms, get controlled by men, thrive, and those who do not need to be punished and set right. There is an emergence of a "new woman" who has a career but isn't too liberal and prioritizes her marriage, home, domestic duties. Giving too much or equal importance to her career as a man is unacceptable. She needs to seek permission from men in her life and compromise no matter what to make a marriage work. In no way is the drama progressive or feminist as marketed by the producers. In fact, it's regressive and hegemonic and sends the message that it's terrible for a woman to be "too modern" or "liberal."

Undoubtedly, ZGH acknowledges patriarchal violence but normalizes it alongside hegemonic "traditional" values. It negotiates social transformation: middle-class women gaining an education, entering the public sphere, asserting autonomy over their bodies, joining the workforce, and challenging male privilege. In the end, domesticity and familial responsibilities are naturalized as women's priorities. Female submission is not a choice but portrayed as something embedded in a woman's chromosomes.

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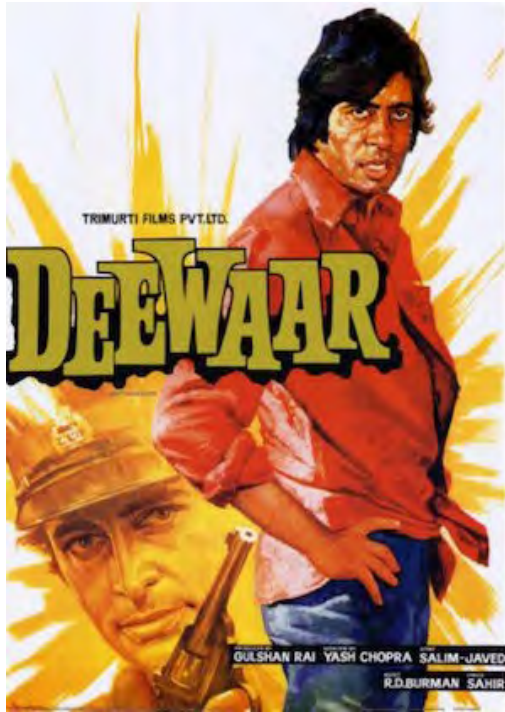
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While stardom in Indian cinema dates back to much earlier, it is in Amitabh Bachchan's hold not only over the audiences but also over the production-distribution systems of the industry that much of the discussion on Hindi film stardom is tethered to. In one of his early hits, the working class action-hero of *Deewar* (1975) showcased a political aesthetic of industrial-entertainment commonsense that defined much of Hindi cinema for at least three decades since.



While *Sonchiriya* may appear to draw its lineage from U.S. Westerns, it is appropriately situated among the outlaw-protagonists of rebel-dacoits, particularly those of the Chambal valley, whose tales have been narrated by scores of popular stage-dramas all across North India. The

Cinema and its spatial predicates: landscapes of debt in search of justice

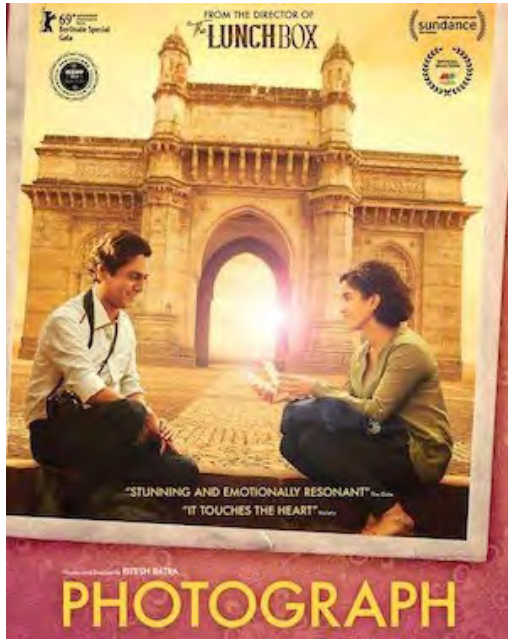
by [Akshaya Kumar](#)

Cinema in India has found it difficult to unlock the embrace of male stardom, notable exceptions notwithstanding. Across the spectrum of Indian film industries, stardom has been not only constitutive of production design, but also central to the commerce of film projects. Among other things, this has had a deep impact on industrial image-making practices, which often seem too frontal, in order to stage a *direct* encounter between the stars and their audiences.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Cinematic landscapes have thus been the key casualty in this sustained flattening of images that unfailingly accumulate around the star. Stars have effectively become the entirety of film landscapes, to the extent that the memory of popular cinema remains hinged to stardom.

However, stardom itself has been deeply tied to the popular aesthetics of social mobility, the aesthetic-political kernel of which, as I have argued elsewhere, has an overlapping history—that of cinema and the city.[2] The urban emergence and spread of popular cinema around the industrial quarters of post-Independence urban India then engaged narratively in a productive conversation with star-protagonists' cinematic journey to the city as an outsider. But since the late 1990s, there has been a gradual flattening of the social mobility narrative arc. Stardom's unprecedented command over film narratives as well as their visual grammar in the twenty-first century, then, is followed by a wider disappearance of India's diverse cultural and political landscapes, the contrasting hues of which were central to the earlier interactions between cinema's stories and the city. That is, Indian cinema dramatically changes in both narrative emphasis and depiction of landscape in the 21st century due partly to and in dialogue with broad *social* changes. The diminution of the social mobility narrative is indeed compensated for by scripting transnational locations for action showdowns or dream sequences, but such cinematic landscapes have only offered refuge to fugitive social aspirations; more often now scripts stage a fantasy dialogue across global capital, investor-friendly national brands and tourist destinations.[3]

This essay raises the question of analyzing cinematic landscapes to re-evaluate the spatial predicates of popular cinema from its margins. As we step out of the stardom-centric visual grammar of popular cinema, what sort of spatial language do we witness on screen? In this essay I wish to situate the cinematic representations of landscapes as sedimentations of human volition, memory and habits, shaped in deep time. In the two films I discuss at length [*Sonchiriya* (Abhishek Chaubey, 2019) and *Photograph* (Ritesh Batra, 2019)], the question of cinematic and social landscape invites us to interpret the habitus (Bourdieu), or the dwelling (Heidegger), upon which concepts the discussed films make vital contributions. Towards a broader trajectory in which to place these films, one

landscape is therefore essentially coded into the film, which revisits the undulating and mysterious ravines, as if to give them their due and pay back popular cinema's outstanding debt.



Most of the posters for *Photograph* establish the chance encounter of an "unlikely couple" in front of an iconic backdrop, triangulating the key elements of the cinematic landscape in a photograph mis-aligned against the cinematic frame. The backdrop represents not merely the crystallisation of popular cinematic memory of Bombay city but also of the cinema it has facilitated in the units of unlikely encounters and fantastic associations.



The undulating landscape of the ravines have fascinated several generation of filmmakers, particularly after *Bandit Queen*. The *baaghi*, after all, offers heroic representation against administrative neglect, crushing poverty and grotesque caste violence. The Chambal valley has also provided the rites of passage for claims to arthouse sophistry, of which Shekhar Kapur, Tigmanshu Dhulia and Abhishek Chaubey have become key landmarks.

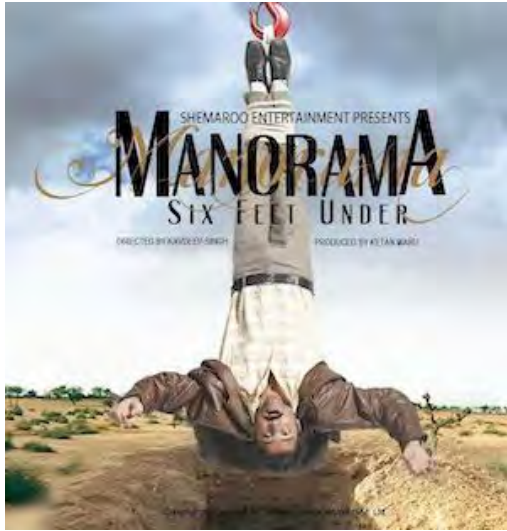
could think of *Khosla ka Ghosla* (2006), *Manorama Six Feet Under* (2007), *Titli* (2014), *Gurgaon* (2017) and the web-series *Paatal Lok* (2020). While all these films cleverly investigate spatial contrasts and actions of relatively unspectacular subjects, they do not challenge the thematic and formal dwellings of popular cinema as directly as *Sonchiriya* and *Photograph* do.

In *Sonchiriya*, the geographical indicators of the landscape amplify the rugged commonsense notion of caste society – righteous, obstinate, delusional, and cruel in unpredictable proportions. The volition and memory embedded in people's understanding of the landscapes, therefore, follow from the narrative tension around caste conflict. In *Photograph*, however, the narrative re-arranges a fragmented geography of aspiration and self-realization, extracting its building blocks from the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) – Hindi popular cinema's ground-zero. But in doing so, the audience's ordinary way of seeing and using popular cinema is thrown into sharp relief against its key predecessor – portrait photography. The landscape of *Photograph* is then saturated with the memory of an older version of popular cinema, rendering the city of Bombay as the script's spatial predicate. But it also uses photography, as I shall establish, to discuss an unredeemed debt. To discuss such a trajectory, in my understanding of the relation between cinematic and social landscapes, I use the key term "predicate" as indicating those ways of rendering spatiality that affirm, support, or reinforce the cinematic proposition offered in the film. In a sense, then, these are predicates upon which the cinematic subject is mounted, or which help found the cinematic subject in fundamental ways. What is key to this argument is the dialogue between cinematic rendering of spatiality and the existing spatiality of built architecture, lived spaces and geographical features; and beyond that, the mutual constitution of media representations and larger social determinants.

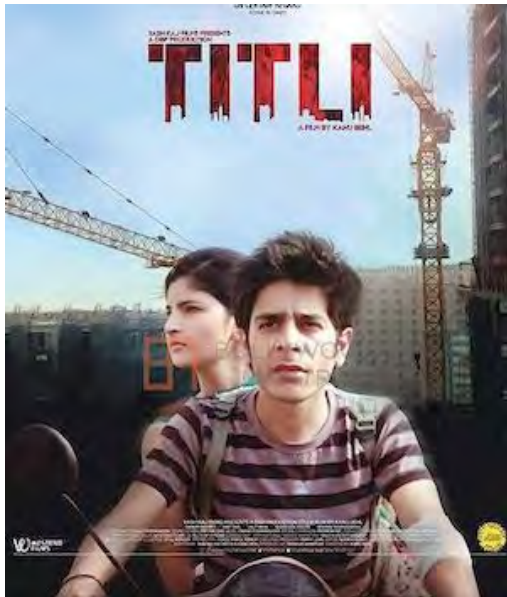
In discussing the predicates of popular cinema, I assess how cinema *recasts* the film audience's cinematic habitus into an industrial-entertainment commonsense understanding of how to make and distribute feature film. The critical distance maintained by the above films from the cinematic habitus occasions a formidable reckoning with the prevailing industrial commonsense, which remains caught within the *data vortex* built around overwhelming box-office numbers, however dubious they may be.[4] While returning to the issue of audience habitus via *Simmba* (2018), I shall reckon with the genre-based segmentation of Hindi cinema since about 2005, in which new affordances have been built for advertising within the media industry.[5] For example, foregrounding the star-body as the pre-eminent landscape within the film characterizes big-budget blockbusters – a template that *Simmba* predictably traverses. In contrast, only in the crevices of the box-office release calendar do aesthetic-political alternatives like *Sonchiriya* and *Photograph* briefly emerge. However, since late capitalism strategically offers the appeal of a differential array of choices, within those, the impact of any radical choice, as discussed below, may be forestalled.

Landscapes of popular memory

This paper discusses two films which challenge popular memory by questioning the "structuring structure" of cinematic narration.[6] One of the key features of this hidden structure has been the trauma of fragmented citizenship – an inability to forget the political wounds inflicted upon the terms and character of one's belonging.[7] Cinema has not only been a key forum for this public mourning, but it has also facilitated a dialogue on the questions of community, traumatic remembrance, rights of access and contestations over privileges. As this paper argues, the deliberation over such questions in cinema keenly resonates with its commitment to render spatial predicates in memory and landscapes to acknowledge the social/political debts in general, and to understand the ground of film history in particular.



Navdeep Singh's *Manorama Six Feet Under* (2007), a remake of U.S. neo-noir *Chinatown* (1974), was one of the rare films of its time to have engaged with the emptiness of landscape as well as everyday life in a desolate small town.



Simon Schama has argued that one of the distinguishing attributes of landscapes in contrast to nature is that memory always pervades the former. [8] This makes *landscape* a profoundly human artefact as within yet opposed to nature. Lukinbeal also calls landscapes a “veritable arena of cultural politics” [9], which either contradict or affirm the dominant narratives of identity. Martin Lefebvre (whose vocabulary I use here) argues that landscape is a form of “spatial predicate”. He distinguishes between setting and landscape by arguing that speaking of “a setting is already to offer an interpretation and to assert a property (a *predicate*) of the filmic space presented in the frame”. [11] In contrast to a script’s setting, then, the cinematic landscape is freed of such a bounded interpretation that could relegate it to the background of narrative events. In speaking then about the visual proportions that determine the “voice” of landscapes, Lefebvre writes that “as long as natural space in a work is subservient to characters, events and action, as long as its function is to provide space for them, the work is not properly speaking a landscape”. [12] To me, this suggests that for landscapes to have a voice, they must be rendered commensurate and proportional to corresponding human characters.

While these spatial predicates invite us into cultural history and representations, they also mediate a dialogue between geographical and social underpinnings of cinema. Cinema’s characters, therefore, do not merely inhabit a space, but their destinies are essentially determined by the spatial predicates identified by audience habitus or viewers’ previously established cultural assumptions as landscapes. For *Sonchiriya*’s bandit-rebels, the ravines of Bundelkhand signify a state of exception on their own terms, just as Bombay does in *Photograph*, with its longstanding association with narratives of social mobility within and without cinema. The landscapes are not only central to these films, but the characters appear resigned, to some degree, and unable to take full charge of their destiny, owing to the spatial predicates of their predicament.

The three films discussed in this paper at some length render landscapes and popular memory in sharply contrasting ways. *Sonchiriya*’s landscape is more directly identifiable as having peculiarly dusty and arid gorges where life forms appear sparsely, whereas the landscape in *Photograph* and *Simmba* does not attract autonomous attention. In *Simmba*, there is a kind of reification within the industrial-entertainment idiom that works how large industrial farms and massive containers key to international supply chain logistics appear to the shopper while in a supermarket. What we witness instead is a neat and strategic editorial ordering of lived spaces and built architecture. The most common typology of industrial cinema is of a set of films that tread on a second-order topology, made upon a distilled memory of popular cinema’s spatial system. In this regard, the two films’ treatments differ greatly – while *Photograph* navigates this sedimented topology towards critical revisioning, *Simmba* only offers second-order spectacle to garnish the popular scripted blend of rape-revenge and uniformed vigilante justice. To question landscape, therefore, is a way to address the spatial predicates of popular cinema, and to assess how political aesthetics may be manifested.

The choice of any political aesthetic poses some key questions. It seeks either to suggest new visual forms that offer paradigmatic shifts in visual culture, or to situate existing forms of visibility within new critical settings, where they are allowed to offset or revise the meanings that the viewer may be habituated to. Landscapes and memory, as I seek to establish below, are crucial to this political exercise in both ways. They may challenge existing forms by introducing new ruptures in cultural politics, or they may reinforce some cultural politics in

Kanu Behl's *Titli* (2014) and Shanker Raman's *Gurgaon* (2017) expose different ends of the neoliberal landscape of rapid development. In both the films, crime is a family business, whether it is meant for subsistence or to maintain social status and political power. The films explore the extended landscape of debt-fuelled "real estate", where control of land on the outskirts of a cancerously growing metropolis creates unaccountable wealth, which has in turn dehumanized the people dwelling in such a landscape.



The spatial predicates of cinema are often more legibly laid out in "regional" film industries where the geography of the region often serves as a key reference for its cultural identification. Drawing upon the previous decade of Marathi cinema, Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) renders the child-protagonist's innocent world in terms of the sparse Khandesh landscape, before rudely awakening him to the cruelties of caste-consciousness.

celebratory affirmation. The critical revisioning operationalized between revenge and justice, and between photography and cinema, renders the topology of unacknowledged social debt to help mount "messy" ideas such as caste-society and social mobility. If building such critical awareness demands probing and tentative navigation of viewers' cinematic habitus, in contrast, blockbusters are marked by cocky citations and signposting the box-office endorsement of their ancestry.

Most of Indian popular cinema having been funded by dubious financiers and first-time producers, the capitalist control of the industries had been particularly slippery before the corporatization began in twenty-first century. Now, in its attempt to regulate popular audiovisuality and mass attention within the world media system, neoliberal capital has also left its overbearing editorial imprint. [13] Editorial intensification in popular cinema, particularly in Hindi cinema after 2005, now consistently regulates cinema's spatial economy at the levels of scripting, filming, and postproduction, especially editing. Increasingly, Hindi films pack many more shots within every sequence, navigate transnational spaces with unprecedented frequency, and are shot with great precision and efficiency. Hindi film industry's spatial economy has thus undergone industrial consolidation in terms of the portfolio of scale, ambition, efficiency and diversity.

Cinematically, a clever use of landscapes – whether open vistas and tourist destinations as backdrops, or cities and small-towns rendered in genre-toned visual grammar – has followed from neoliberal capital's accumulative and differentiating axes. Landscapes as life-forms have no use in such a rendering. In contrast, *Sonchiriya* and *Photograph* are vital critiques of this *industrial landscaping* of popular cinema and they illustrate how the spatial predicates of political aesthetics could be mounted on film history. While these films did not create much of a stir at the box-office, their dissenting observations challenge us to take stock of the popular cinema habitus.



Nagraj Manjule's second film, *Sairat* (2016), aestheticizes landscape in the service of melodrama to step away from both - realist narration and Marathi cinema's regional bearings. See Kumar (2021) for more.



The web-series *Paatal Lok* (2020) explores the world of crime, via a particular case that connects different quarters of the national capital region with Bundelkhand, Punjab and Nepal. The series gradually reveals that Delhi is not so much a metropolis as a circus where scores of navigation pathways intersect, and are

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Between revenge and justice



Sonchiriya opens with a sequence of forewarning, in which Man Singh's gang come across a dead snake, which Man Singh sets aside against the wishes of his sceptical deputies, who thought it would bring a curse upon them. While praying the goddess for their safety after doing so, Man Singh also explains that changing the route won't diminish or eliminate the curse.

Set in the tumultuous year of 1975, *Sonchiriya* is the story of rival gangs divided by caste affiliations in the ravines of Chambal valley, where revenge and retribution are valorized as individual sacrifices to the caste-community. The film follows the *baaghi* [rebels] gang led by Man Singh, in which Lakhna and Vakeel Singh are his prime deputies, while inspector Virendra Singh Gujjar leads the administrative assault upon them. Man Singh walks into one such trap, knowingly—as it is revealed much later in the film—only to get shot down. This leads to a tactical as well as territorial battle between Lakhna and Vakeel Singh. Well into this conflict, we are introduced to Indumati and an “untouchable” little girl, Sonchiriya [the Golden bird], who was raped by Indumati's *thakur* [a dominant landowning upper caste in north India] father-in-law.

Indumati is on the run because she shot the rapist to death, which means that his family is baying for her blood. She begs the *baaghis* to rescue them and take Sonchiriya to a hospital, to which they agree. But following another dispute, Lakhna's team escapes along with Indumati and Sonchiriya, which is when Vakeel vows to finish them off. At this point, we are introduced to a backstory in which the *baaghis* had mistakenly killed several innocent children in Gujjar's village. It is to redeem this curse that Man Singh thought he owed destiny a chance to punish him. For Lakhna, who is scarred by the curse, Sonchiriya is his shot at repentance, even though he finds himself amidst an endless gang-war of caste militias. While he succeeds in taking Sonchiriya to the hospital, both he and Vakeel are shot down by Gujjar, who is then shot down by his two *thakur* constables.

In a way, *Sonchiriya* is a rape-revenge film, narrated in sharp distinction against the genre's heyday as a female vigilante action film. It does not foreground rape—neither as a salacious or horrendous event, nor as a narrative device to enunciate revenge. Both the events of rape and revenge, by the time the viewers come across them, have already triggered a whole host of disturbances in the caste-segregated ecosystem. In this ecosystem, the rebels constitute a political society of outlaws, which is yet firm in its adherence to the caste-order. Caste works, then, at two apparently contradictory levels: first, as the basis of emergent solidarities among the rebel factions antagonistic to the social order; and second, as the kernel of a social order which the rebels yet affirm by holding on to its enduring divisions.



Indumati takes a shot at the Thakur gang, while begging them to admit her in their protection, along with Sonchiriya—her “younger sister”, a claim which soon turns out to be false, when Sonchiriya's untouchable caste identity is revealed.



The curse makes repeated haunting appearances in the form of a girl-child, who represents all the Gujjar children mistakenly gunned down by Man Singh's Thakur gang. The inability to wipe off her haunting image even in the midst of a gangwar eventually leads to both Man

Their counterparts within the civil society, as it were, are just as abiding to the caste-order and even more violent in their pursuit to maintain the “given” hierarchies. For the film, masculine vanguards of both these orders constitute the political landscape as a setting, against which the film’s foreground takes shape via gender politics. It is two women who disturb both, the “civil” and the “political” equilibrium of the caste-order, by refusing to abide by the violent subjugation embedded within the heteronormative order. It is therefore the female body as a battleground, and gender politics as the defining edge of social overhauling, that lead the narrative challenge to the caste-order.



Having been shot dead during a robbery raided by the police, the corpses of Man Singh and his dacoit comrades are paraded by Gujar in his village. The public celebration, in which women beat pots and pans, does not portray Man Singh as the symbol of criminal outlaws but as the Thakur gang leader who had wronged the Gujjars, thereby marking the chief of the police operation not as much a representative of law and administration as that of his caste.

Seen another way, *Sonchiriya* is a film about the landscape in which human civilization is unable to transcend its elementary ecological principle of violence, to the extent that survival depends not on cohabitation but violence. Since life forms can flourish only at the cost of one another, the principle explicates the rule of hierarchy upon which territoriality, power and community rest. The principle is pronounced upfront in the film before it is enunciated at the end, particularly amplified by the inability of even the police force to rise above caste divides. The macabre principle of violence is best expressed in a song in the film:

Saanp khavega chuhe ko, saanp ko khavenge gidh
Jehi niyam duniya ko, keh gaye sadu sidh
 [Snakes shall eat the rats, vultures shall eat the snakes
 That is the rule of the world, renowned sages have proclaimed]



The film opens with this close shot of a dead snake, which later appears in repeated idioms as the ecological link between rats and vultures. The dead snake, as representative of a curse upon Man Singh's gang, also foretells their tragic destiny.



Phoolan Devi was a famous dacoit of the Chambal ravines, whose story is a part of various legends. Before giving up arms and joining the Parliament, she had led the Mallah gang for

Another perverse illustration of this violent geo-social episteme is offered in the case of Indumati's son, who embodies the ruthless caste and gender supremacy of the *thakurs*. His overzealous and unflinchingly violent demeanour to her mother is rendered ironical by the revelation that he is himself a product of rape – his grandfather who raped Sonchiriya had also raped Indumati, resulting in his birth. The perversity of being violently dismissive of both – the specific *event* of violence performed on the female body that gave birth to oneself, as well as the *structural* violence in which one takes the aggressor's view – is used to amplify the sociological condition signified in the visual landscape of Chambal ravines.

This ecosystem is unsettled by *Sonchiriya*, whose out-caste body has found an upper caste protector in Indumati. A gendered solidarity thus threatens to disrupt securely guarded caste loyalties. But *Sonchiriya* unfolds upon a counterfactual plane, driven by “improbable” solidarities: Sonchiriya finds an unlikely protector in Indumati, Indumati finds an unlikely protector in Lakhna, a *baaghi* thakur himself, and Lakhna finds a protector in Phoolan, the leader of the rival Mallah gang. Sonchiriya's elusive and “barely-there” being thus anchors an otherwise *unlikely* set of events. As an event as well as metaphor for the film, she enables

several years and was particularly hostile to the Thakurs, who had gangraped her before she turned a dacoit. By throwing Phoolan into the mix, the film plays with fact and fiction but also amplifies the bewildering mystery of the ravines – marked as they are by curses, traumas, unknown threats lurking in the gorges and outlaw desires for freedom. Caste appears to be the only reliable anchor in this landscape, and the battle-hardened Phoolan's help to Lakhna's Thakur gang the unlikelyst of events, which affirms *Sonchiriya's* gender politics.

unlikely protagonists to rise from the ashes of caste-hardened landscapes.

However, this extraordinary series of events is reinforced by a key formulation, stated explicitly by Lakhna to Vakeel Singh – that *revenge is not justice*. The convergence of revenge upon justice is not an innocent formulation in the history of cinema. It has particularly shaped action cinemas across the world, thereby crystallizing the “naturalized” assumption that revenge should be a legitimate stand-in for justice. Revenge is thus seen as the itemization of the unduly long process of justice. It appears to establish a part that instantiates the whole. Such appearances are however deceptive, if not entirely misleading.



In his showdown with Lakhna, Vakeel Singh declares emphatically that revenge is the only form of justice available to the ravines. The *baaghi-dharma*, for him, is an unequivocal protection of one's caste community, an ethic that Lakhna openly challenges setting him off in search of an alternative destiny in defiance of the spatial predicates.



One of the two Thakur constables who assist Gujjar in his raids and operations decries their fate of having to assist a Gujjar against his own brethren, to which the other responds that there is no uniform greater than one's skin. Stating the ultimate indisputability of *caste as skin*, he assures his comrade that the administrative ranks cease to matter when it comes to the entitlements of birth. Indeed, the film ends with them shooting Gujjar down.

Whatever the origins of violence by caste militias, those placed lower in the caste hierarchy have invariably suffered beyond compare on account of vengeance. Glorifying revenge thus becomes a direct endorsement of existing social hierarchies. Viewers are therefore cornered by *Sonchiriya* to deliberate over the distinction, while they are introduced to a revelation, in flashback, that *baaghi* Man Singh, the leader of the pack, submitted his militia as the sacrificial offering for the cause of a higher justice. Since they committed a grave error of judgement, they must give the Gujjar militia an opportunity to avenge their dead children. “*Chukano toh padego* [the debt must be repaid],” Singh mutters to himself, while ordering his men to jump into an elaborate setup.

Sonchiriya is thus driven by a troubled conscience – entangled between a righteous vigil and vigilante justice – to which Man Singh submits on a personal whim. The accountants of revenge-scores in this arid landscape of relentless violence, the film avers, are yet haunted by the lurking presence of a girl child they accidentally murdered. This haunting figure, it seems, returns in the body of Sonchiriya, drawing the Thakurs, Gujjars and Mallahs in a prolonged deliberation over their *baaghi-dharma* (rebel-ethic). Consider two previous meditations on the rebel ethic in the light of which *Sonchiriya* would be invariably assessed – *Bandit Queen* (1994) and *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), both marked by a landmark fidelity to Bundeli dialect. While there is substantial mutual borrowing between Hindi and Bundeli, the so-called dialect can be hard to follow for most Hindi speakers. The fidelity to Bundeli in *Bandit Queen* was unprecedented for its time and became the foremost basis of its gritty realism.

Paan Singh Tomar followed the high standards of linguistic fidelity set in *Bandit Queen* and also foregrounded the punishing brutality – socio-political as well as geographical – of the ravines landscape. Both the biographies of a *baaghi* character revolve around a traumatized protagonist, who rebels against repeated humiliation and exploitation. Paan Singh, an athlete of national repute, was

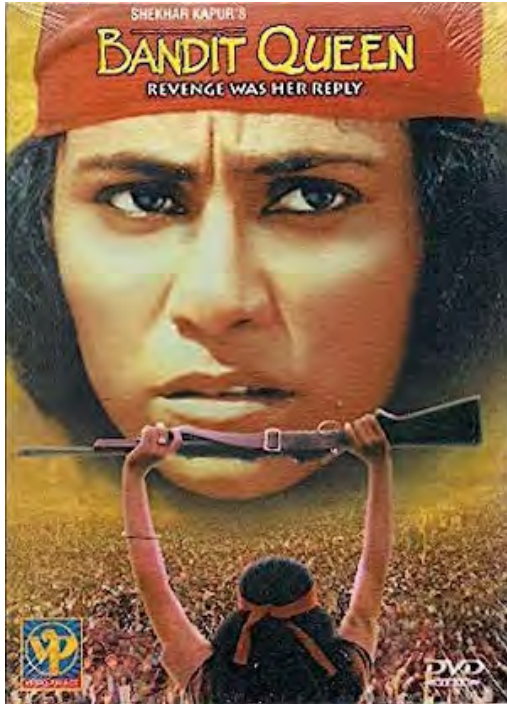


Setting off for the endgame on a death wish to avenge his younger brother, who was killed in an altercation with Lakhna, Vakeel Singh is devastated when he learns about Man Singh's wilful entry into a trap set for him.



Towards the end of the film, Vakeel Singh reconciles with Lakhna and lays down his own life to send Sonchiriya to a hospital, where she

survives even though Lakhna is shot dead outside. Explicitly foregrounding how the undulating landscape overdetermines their destinies, Vakeel Singh declares that they have all been looking for their own *mukti* [liberation], for which Sonchiriya is both an event and a metaphor.



Bandit Queen, while an iconic milestone of Indian cinema, was unambiguously marketed as a rape-revenge story. It used a famous female-politician's body and the public interest in her legendary rape to install her in the foreground as an avenging woman, perfectly in tune with the exploitation films which nonetheless deployed a moralizing overtone.

forced to reluctantly take up arms only to settle a family dispute, on account of governmental apathy. His story was mounted to shake the conscience of the nation, forcing us to reckon with "the abyss" in which the nation pushes its champions.

In *Bandit Queen*, on the contrary, the state is absent as a horizon, till it emerges as an ally of the abusive caste elites at the very end. Phoolan's traumatic journey is however repurposed as a rape-revenge epic unfolding in the back of the beyond, where the state appears only after the Behmai massacre, the centerpiece. Arundhati Roy wrote in her famous takedown of the film, effectively arguing that it is a classic exploitation text,

"It is of consummate importance to the Emotional Graph of the film, that you never, ever, stop pitying her. That she never threatens the Power Balance.

I would have thought that this was anathema to the whole point of the Phoolan Devi story. That it went way beyond the *You-Rape-Me: I'll-Kill- You* equation. That the whole point of it was that she got a little out of *control*. That the Brutalized became the Brute.

The film wants no part of this. Because of what it would do to the Emotional Graph. To understand this, you must try and put Rape into its correct perspective. The Rape of a *nice* Woman (saucy, headstrong, foul-mouthed perhaps, but basically *moral, sexually moral*) - is one thing. The rape of a nasty/perceived-to-be-immoral woman, is quite another. It wouldn't be quite so bad. You wouldn't feel quite so sorry. Perhaps you wouldn't feel sorry at all...

According to Shekhar Kapur's film, every landmark - every decision, every turning-point in Phoolan Devi's life, starting with how she became a dacoit in the first place, has to do with having been raped, or avenging rape.

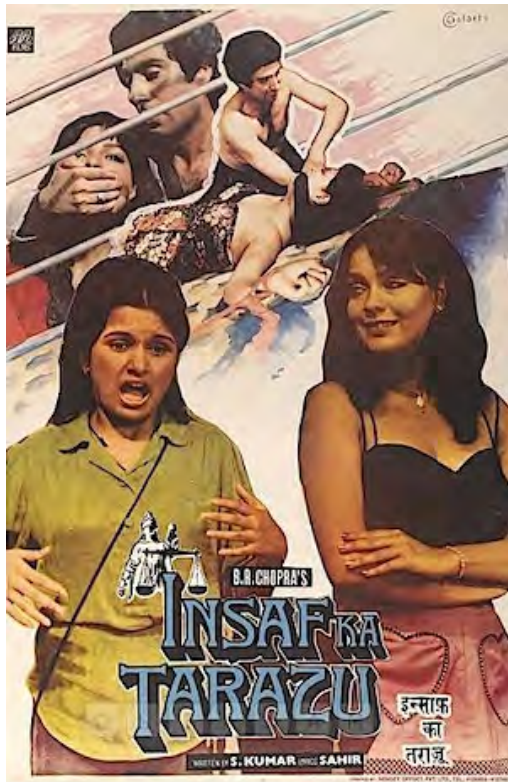
He has just blundered through her life like a Rape-diviner

You cannot but sense his horrified fascination at the havoc that a wee willie can wreak. It's a sort of reversed male self absorption.

Rape is the main dish. Caste is the sauce that it swims in." [14] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Indeed, regardless of the realism for which *Bandit Queen* was widely celebrated, the film was baked in the furnace of rape-revenge genre, which persisted for two decades in Hindi popular cinema, beginning with *Insaaf ka Tarazu* (1980). [15] The genre had a delayed follow-up with *Pratighaat* (1987), *Sherni* (1988), *Zakhmi Aurat* (1988) and *Kaali Ganga* (1990). In these films – along with the many remakes of *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991), particularly *Agnisakshi* (1996) – the "scandal" of sexual violence is stressed at length for its titillation reinforced by the screaming rape victim.

The mobilization of public outrage, after all, needs the prolonged public suffering of the female body to scandalize "reality," marinated in a violent social disposition. Gopalan also points out that in most of these films we witness "vociferous stagings of 'reality'". [16] The spatial predicates of narration in *Bandit Queen* are therefore in tune with the desired saturation of reality within the rape-revenge framework, which often speaks in the melodramatic overtones of the symbolism of social justice. *Sonchiriya* certainly derives its spatial grammar from *Bandit Queen* but it gives the center-stage to the landscape, which appears to determine the choices its characters make. In fact, one could argue that the film draws its continuity with the biographies of outlaw-protagonists, while attempting the biography of the Chambal valley itself. The film refuses to accept revenge as justice because it takes the view of the landscape, in which revenge is situated within the macabre principle of structural violence. [17]



Insaf ka Tarazu was an exploitation film dressed as a courtroom drama, which inspired a whole variety of rape-revenge films that toggled between exploring the public scandal of rape and the vigilante license it gave to the broken woman.

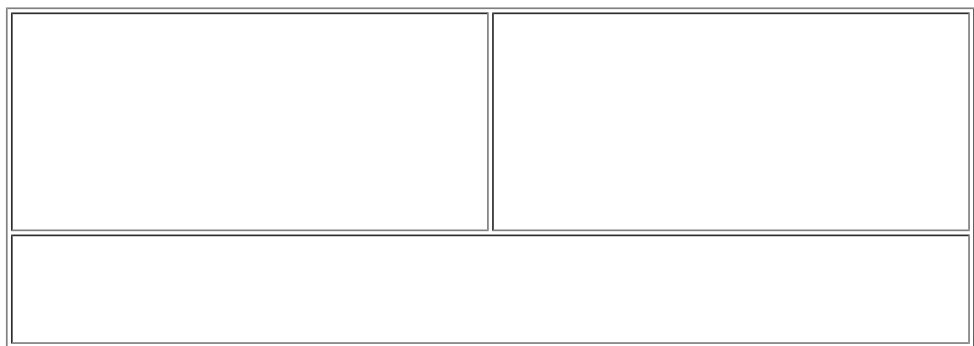
Also, *Sonchiriya* not only foregrounds the landscape but also departs from the previous *baaghi* films since the protagonists of both *Bandit Queen* and *Paan Singh Tomar* take to the battlefield, surrendering to the idea that revenge is the only form of justice they could yet avail. They set off on a cycle of violence to redeem their pledge for self-respect, but the wheel of violence does not stop at their command. In effect, the scripts arrive at the futility of revenge even as they navigate the treacherous terrain between revenge and justice.

In *Sonchiriya*, the deliberation about justice outside the realm of law works in tandem with the characters' navigation of the mysterious landscape of the *beehad* [ravines] outside the realm of society. Visually, landscape is foregrounded to facilitate depicting the treacherous character of delivering justice, either by the police or the outlaws. When asked to explicitly state the *baaghi-dharma*, Vakil Singh unflinchingly declares it is to protect one's caste-community. But the film stages his proclamations as standing against Man Singh's mystified certitudes. It is, after all, the latter's ethical code, scrambled between revenge and justice, which forms the basis of the film. *Sonchiriya* is, after all, a story about *the debt revenge owes to justice*.

The film endorses an interlocking violence of geography, language and society while offering the river as an aesthetic counterpoint. The visual representation of Chambal river has a calming effect over the bullet-ridden narration. In the midst of a landscape marked by dry throats and hair filled with dust, the river extends over the film the same effect that it does over the arid landscape. Established in the haunting melody of *Sonchiraiya* – the song which opens with the sound of ripples as a boat ferries Lakhna's unit across Chambal – the river becomes a metaphor of life amidst a relentless march towards death. It is on the river that the boatman declares *Sonchiriya* as someone who has destiny on her side and where Lakhna reveals to Indumati the curse that haunts him. The river provides the audience an entry into the characters' irrational beliefs and anxieties – in an oblique conversation with a psychographic super-space, as if to establish an alternative valence of truths which could not have been revealed on the land.



The Chambal river, one of the main tributaries of the Himalayan river Yamuna, provides a stark contrast to the landscape by offering us a calm intermission between the spells of deranged death-fetish of the caste militias.



The sequences shot in the scorching sun are contrasted with a few shot in pitch darkness. It is obvious that the villages of Chambal valley are not connected to the electricity grid. In a sequence reminiscent of *Chauthi Koot*, Lakhna visits a village to seek help, where the frame made visible by a lantern reminds us of the failure of political-administrative oversight to reorder the caste society.





Sonchiriya takes a distant view of the conflict and lets the spatial predicates loom large over the characters' destiny. Man Singh's gang is on the run for most of the film, leaving us to make sense of Chambal valley's harsh life, marked by sweltering heat, extreme dust, strong winds, no vegetation in sight and chilly nights. To the extent that the undulating floodplains and gullies of the ravines have been formed via fluvial erosion, the river remains a haunting "absent presence" even in vast, open and dusty spaces where most of the film unfolds. The key action sequences are also meticulously mounted in terms of their complex spatiality towards a shot-design indicating the idea that the threat to one's life can come from any direction. When in built spaces, we are confronted by open courtyards and terraces as well as labyrinthine rooms and corridors, whereas the vast stretch of ravines are marked by deep gorges and steep gradients.



The action sequences in the built environment are staged via shots of open verandas and

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| <p>courtyards, watched over by death, lurking behind the walls. The uneven but connected rooftops are used to orchestrate the navigation of architecture that is designed for trust, sharing and openness, but is also routinely visited by the intersecting horrors of law, greed and revenge.</p> | |

The film deploys this landscape during action sequences to establish how the gorges both protect and multiply one's vulnerability, depending on how intimately one knows them as a lived habitat.

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| <p>The undulating gorges and cliffs baked in the harshness of the scorching sun over the dusty ravines offers open vistas where strategic positions are of incredible value. In all the action sequences, therefore, what matters the most is to know the ravines intimately, so as to attack where the enemy is the most vulnerable.</p> | |

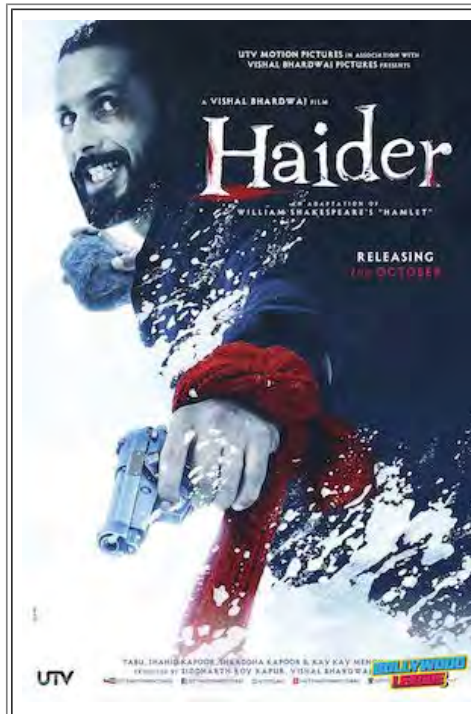
It also deploys an intricate shot-design marked by low and high angle shots, drone-captured top views and steadicam shots – all used to mount the landscape of death. As an aggregate, the film tries to blend the human and non-human actors in an audiovisual assembly of hidden threats to life, lurking in the shadows, behind doors, walls and the veil of darkness. It is this aggregation that establishes how the influence of its landscape is extended over the characters, overwhelming the narration with its spatial predicates.



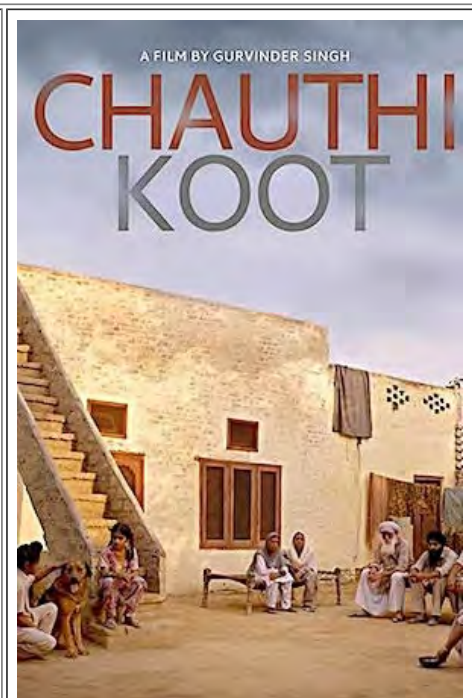
Portraying the *behead* [ravines] as the landscape of death, the film navigates all the built architecture with circumspect and alert anticipation of rival factions. ...

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| <p>... While extremely difficult to navigate and poorly connected to information networks, strategic peer networks operate on the basis of caste-solidarity and sustained patronage. ...</p> | <p>... However, vulnerability in the times of a crisis allows these networks to be intercepted, disturbing the law of the landscape.</p> |

In mounting this landscape of deathly action, *Sonchiriya* follows the recent triumphs of *Haider* (2014) and *Chauthi Koot* (2015). Both are set in militant insurgency ridden environs of 1990s' Kashmir valley and 1980s' Punjab, respectively. Even though Kashmir valley has fascinated Hindi cinema since the 1960s – after the use of colour became routine[18] – as a lush backdrop for romantic endeavours, *Haider* passes over the mountains and meadows, speaking through Kashmir's frigid, misty and snow-covered wintery landscape to present its anguished cry for justice. It foregrounds the “blood on snow” aesthetic, speaking instead of death, graves, blood, sullen skies and bloodied Jhelum's search for its banks.



As an adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet, *Haider* told the tragic story of Kashmir valley where millions have been killed and disappeared by the repressive Indian state in an endless conflict. The film enters the landscape via Haider's personal story to split open the macabre landscape of violence, so as to speak for a public instead of private atrocity.



Chauthi Koot explores the scars of time over militancy-ridden Punjab, but instead of individuating trauma by rendering it interiority, it searches for the deathly horror of everyday fear and violence upon the lived landscape.

Chauthi Koot cumulates two short stories, situating its continuity upon the period of insurgent violence and forced disappearances in which they are set. It speaks through the dread of the darkness, the foggy winter chill, the open fields of unanticipated threats and the walls unable to protect from decades of trauma and anger. *Chauthi Koot's* deeply political subject is treated without any direct reference to Punjab's humiliation and revolt in the separatist movement of the 1980s. Its narrative progression depends entirely on the landscape of dread and death, which becomes self-explanatory only from the vantage point of Punjab's political history. *Sonchiriya* too treads a deeply political landscape of caste atrocities, administrative subjugation and suspension of social order, while staying vigilant about the fact that the attention to spatial predicates must



Vakeel Singh, who stands as the pre-eminent masculine vanguard for his caste brethren, endorses an unambiguous, aggressive charge, even if towards certain death. It is this death-wish that *Sonchiriya* frames as the spirit of the ravines, which must gradually reconcile with more invisible and mysterious forces of natural justice.

broaden the narrative frame beyond human actors. Traumatic subjectivity is meticulously synthesized in the film with both human and non-human actors making sense of their ghastly predicament.

Also, unlike the Japanese classic, *Woman in the Dunes* (1964), *Sonchiriya* does not allegorise the landscape to comment on the existential crisis of human condition. Instead, its landscape is knitted into the historico-political condition of the subjects. The deliberation on justice in *Sonchiriya* presents a double bind, between oppressive caste divides on the social front and the modern state's indifference to bring justice to the ravines on the political front. In this regard, *Sonchiriya* only revisits the long fascination with the rebellious iconicity of the dacoit figure [armed bandit-rebels who led gangs of outlaws in the name of community honour since the colonial era, most famous of them hailing from the Chambal valley] in Hindi cinema as well as Nautanki theatre performances [one of the most popular north Indian forms of operatic stage drama, which coarsely blends the mythological, nationalist, or contemporary themes of devotion, social reform, heroic valour etc.]. [19] Such narratives, which thrived in symbolic defiance against colonial authority, have been re-modulated to raise questions of social justice in varying contexts. But they were gradually reduced to subaltern revenge and heroic icons, who have thrived in popular cinema regardless. [20] *Sonchiriya* is a rare film that refuses to submit the landscape in the service of heroic navigation of a symbolic super-space. It negotiates the undulating floodplains to re-assess how the landscape itself predicates the heroic interim, before submerging it in the dust.

Between photography and cinema

Photograph begins with a chance encounter between an upper-middle class Gujarati Hindu woman, Miloni, and a Muslim migrant man from Uttar Pradesh, Rafi, at Mumbai's iconic monument, the Gateway of India. The encounter takes place in front of the famous Taj Mahal Hotel; that hotel had been the site of a memorable city film, *E hai bumbai nagariya* [This is Bombay city], featuring Hindi cinema's major star Amitabh Bachchan at the peak of his stardom in *Don* (1978). Thus, an iconic landscape of film history kickstarts a most unlikely and awkward friendship between Miloni and Rafi. As a petty photographer, Rafi struggles to make ends meet and is also trying to repay old debts. To pacify his insistent grandmother, who wishes to see him married, he shows her Miloni's photograph, but it complicates matters further when she insists upon meeting her. Rafi, then, tracks Miloni down and convinces her to role-play his girlfriend Noorie.



Miloni walks past Rafi while he offers his usual routine from behind her, about how this photograph between the Gateway and the Taj hotel will remind her years later of the sun and the wind.



Rafi shares his disappointment with his friend about Miloni running off, while we can see the Gateway on his left and Taj on his right.



Rafi stands outside his chawl writing a letter to his grandmother. Thinking of Miloni, he makes up the story about having met a woman of romantic interest. Drawing upon the song from the 1979 film *Noorie*, playing in the background, he gives her the name Noorie.

In the process, the role-playing becomes indistinguishable from an actual relationship between them, even if much awkwardness remains. Miloni becomes

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more aware of her privileges as well as her impoverished emotional life, but more importantly, she begins to identify with herself via the role-playing.

It is the gap of identification between Miloni as the subject and the object that clears the narrative space which the film navigates. She is never fully comfortable in any of the worlds she inhabits, but Rafi's grandmother introduces her to an unknown bliss. The grandmother's inquisitive, assertive, exacting and witty personality introduces Miloni to a host of possibilities outside her excruciating spiral of middle-class drudgery: classes, examinations, career and marriage. Miloni's slow re-education is thus rendered across vignettes, weaving together a tentative tale of a tentative bond. *Photograph* is marked by a fragile texture, represented by Miloni's uncertain eyes and the absence of stable communication. Rafi and Miloni struggle with their liminality on the differential scale of class consciousness and intonations. Their encounter represents the vast cultural gulf that millions negotiate every day to dwell in an urban landscape riven with social mobility aspirations and stark contrasts.



Miloni looks nonplussed while dresses are held against her to capture and ornament her essence in an invisible mirror before her. Her disinterested and stifled body in the scene is used to present her sleepwalking personality prior to the photographic reckoning that awakens her.



Miloni begins to enjoy her role-playing almost instantly. As she eases into Noorie, she does not even hesitate from making up stories about herself.

It is only Rafi's grandmother – a Sonchiriya-surrogate, one could surmise – who makes every turf her own. Taking confidence from her, Miloni finds her feet in the course of the story. In Rafi, she finds an anchor to navigate the undulating landscape of middle-class anxieties. Her reincarnation is best established in a scene where the uneasy Miloni appears uncharacteristically confident. To the suitor looking to affirm her desire to migrate with him overseas, she declares that she would like to live in a village, go to the agrarian fields in the morning, eat her lunch there and sleep under a tree. This shocks the man who is trying to catapult her out of the drudgery of incremental social mobility. Curiously though, the village for Miloni is just an avenue for romantic escape; she is unaware why her maid, whose village she wants to visit, has chosen to work day and night at her apartment.



Miloni's suitor, Chintan, is bemused when Miloni shares her fantasy about settling down in a village.



Miloni's defiant rejection of her tutor's advances come as a surprise, particularly because she publically owns up to her cross-class romance. From the opening scene in a garment store, Miloni appears to have come a long way ahead, owing much to her role-playing.

Miloni's journey on this track is triggered by a stiff portrait Rafi shot of her. The photograph splits open the world of role-playing, revealing to her the possibility of transformation from subject to object. It establishes a mysterious *photographic surplus* – the property of a portrait to accentuate subjective characteristics in a framed object detached from its surroundings. This surplus acquaints Miloni with a part of herself as yet unknown, which she discovers further by agreeing to role-play Noorie for Rafi's grandmother.



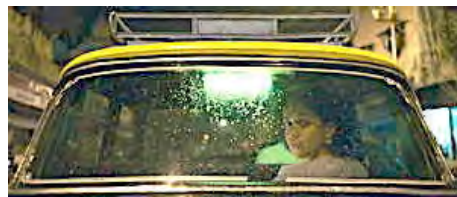
While Rafi thinks his adventure with Miloni would end soon after the first few meetings with the grandmother, it is Miloni who indirectly keeps their admittedly awkward encounters going.



As Miloni learns about the village from Rafi's grandmother, she begins to take interest in her live-in maid's village too, which she promises to visit someday. Her late night conversation with the maid display increasing empathy and affection between them, showing that the role-playing has gone much deeper

In Noorie, Miloni gets to live the lie that Rafi's portrait rendered. On the way, she finds her way around role-playing, inventing backstories for Noorie and breaching new barriers of class-based socializing. In a script like this, a character shown role-playing creates a doubling effect, since it also heightens viewers' awareness of cinema as a form of storytelling. As we witness Miloni play Noorie, we also become doubly aware of the ways in which Sanya Malhotra, the actress, plays Miloni.

Photograph, therefore, implicates us in revisiting the essential and originary value of photographic surplus in the script's cinematic journey of aspirations and self-discovery. And to this effect, the film deploys a paper photograph from a portable printer. The film thus foregrounds *the debt cinema owes to photography* by navigating the iconic landscape of popular memory, predicated upon the city of Bombay. It needs clarifying that Bombay (or *Bambai*, for north Indian migrants to the city) is not reducible to Mumbai, but the city remains a curious blend of cinematic and lived realities, the iconic and the unseen, the aspirational and the banal.



The film offers a photographic landscape that repeatedly plays with the idea of framing along with role-playing. The signature black-and-yellow taxis are at the heart of the Bombay cinematic footprint.

The chance encounter at an iconic cinematic gateway inaugurates *Photograph's* undulating topology; it sets up a romantic instance which has been the mainstay of the promise of social mobility in cinema.[21] But the film also ends on a significant note, reflecting over the place of cinema in everyday life of the city that has enabled it for about a century. We witness Rafi and Miloni watching a film at a rundown single-screen theatre – a site which has forged in cinema the romance across irreconcilable social differences. In these ruins of a film theatre, the realist arthouse film *Photograph* confronts its now-vanquished adversary, the Hindi melodrama, amidst the working class subalterns, who have been at the heart of popular cinema's century of success.



The follow up scene in the annexe of the film theatre appears at the climax, more than half an hour after the moment where Rafi and Miloni are seen in a film theatre. While the scene, as well as the film, ends with them exiting the theatre on account of Rafi's claim that all the films sell an unrealistic story, *Photograph* assures us that its own lead couple have managed to stick together in spite of the odds.

The spell cast over Miloni abruptly bursts when a rodent passes over her feet. Deeply unsettled, she cannot sit any longer in the same seat. She is shocked with disgust and heads for the exit. However, when the scene resurfaces at the climax, we learn that Miloni goes out to wait for Rafi, where he promptly arrives and they decide to leave together. Sitting in the annex surrounded by kitschy action film posters and spit-stained wallpaper, Rafi claims to already know how the film would unfold. Even though he has not seen it before, Rafi “knows” what lies ahead in the film because according to him, all films have the same story anyway. He tells Miloni that the lead couple would fall in love, but the girl's parents will object to their relationship since the boy is an ordinary motor mechanic. The film which began with Rafi's zestful persuasion, hawking his amateur street-photographer skills to Miloni, therefore, ends with his pessimism about popular cinema's capacity to surprise him.

Indeed, it seems that Rafi is indirectly commenting upon his own relationship with Miloni, since he too cannot fulfill the expectations of social status for Miloni's parents, even if the two young people were to declare their love for each other. Yet, meek submission rankles against his defiant refusal to submit to his place within the social hierarchy throughout the film. I would argue that Rafi's cynicism about the film is an allegorical acknowledgement of the fading light of cinema, at the point where it begins to appear staid and repetitive, even though life in Bombay itself is not. After all, popular cinema has elaborately staged the ritual of social mobility over the years, particularly via romance narratives between a subaltern man and middle/upper class woman. Yet, *Photograph*, propelled by the transformative prowess of a singular image, is unable to clinch the momentum to a similar effect.

In her first encounter with Rafi, Miloni is startled into being photographed at the Gateway. She retreats for a split second while an inner radiance occupies the foreground. In this moment of reckoning, she stands witness to the power and meaning of photography. Indeed, she might as well have flicked the photograph away, declaring that all portraits look “the same anyway” – which they do, as much as all the films have “the same story”, as Rafi declares. Yet, the film's defiant pursuit hails this photographic portrait to summon us into an unlikely romance between Miloni and Rafi. In this way, at a time of unprecedented excess, *Photograph* hails the classic restrained portrait instead of its candid adversary. In the process, hailing the photographic surplus, the film argues that popular cinema has *undermined* this surplus instead of enriching it further. The return to the origins, towards the “original” encounter with role-playing and subject-object differentials, confronts popular cinema by foregrounding this working class hero's triangulated negotiation of everyday aspiration, photography and the moving image.

It is important to recall that Rafi represents the social cluster that remains Hindi popular cinema's essential and enduring catchment. The question he helps us ask is whether popular cinema has taken the focal object of its narration for granted. More importantly, *Photograph* appears to argue that popular cinema has wasted



They often wait at bus stops for each other and set off for the meetings with the grandmother. The awkwardness between them gradually eases down.

the photographic surplus and has been stripped of its vitality by the production routine. *Photographi's* key maneuver is to return to the spatial predicates of Hindi popular cinema and reclaim the possibilities inherent in the cinematic form. The film therefore begins at the Gateway and Hotel Taj and navigates Bombay with BEST buses and signature black-and-yellow taxis and steamers. The characters wait for each other at the bus stops, where scores of Hindi films have turned chance encounters into enduring romances, and spend a leisurely evening in the Fort area or at the city's iconic coastline and Juhu chowpatty. The film's climactic sequence is shot on the balcony seats of an old film theatre, in front of which an entire century of cinema has passed by.



Rafi and Miloni navigate the city mainly via its cinematic spatial predicates, spending time at the iconic Gateway and Juhu beach, on the steamer and at a film theatre.



Miloni also visits Rafi's chawl during the day, when all his friends are away on work. The scene is preceded by a prolonged awkward moment in the taxi where the driver twice asks where they want to go, without any answer from Rafi before we witness them approaching his chawl.

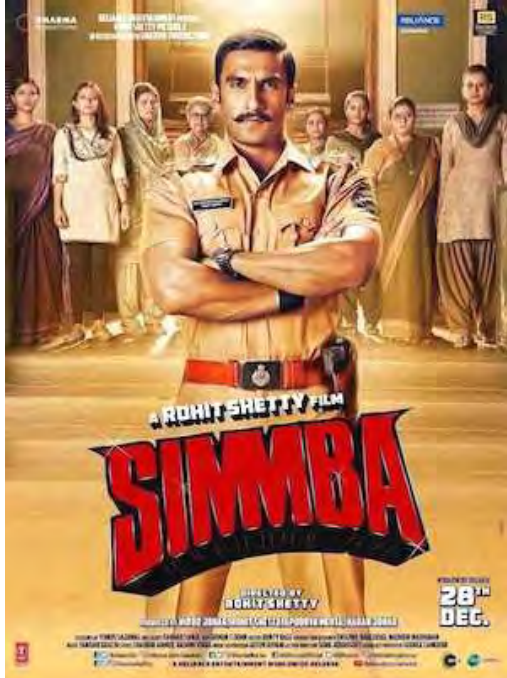
The film thus retraces the landscape of cinematic Bombay, unpacking the spatial journey from photography, as an allied pursuit traversing iconic spaces and monuments, towards the moving image in which iconic isolation of the subject is dissolved into everyday dwellings. Just as Miloni is fascinated by her own portrait, which she thinks makes her look happier and prettier – almost, a different person – the film tries to establish a surplus by navigating the all too familiar spatial units of popular cinema but cumulating them in a heightened re-cognition. It is only by returning to the photographic surplus of what images could mean – by reconfiguring the subject as an object within a new social frame – that the film inspires a new awakening of Hindi cinema's ground-zero. The critical return to the landscape in which popular film history is crystallized as a common-sense is to revitalize cinema's treatment of characters and the spaces in which they dwell.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The counterpoint

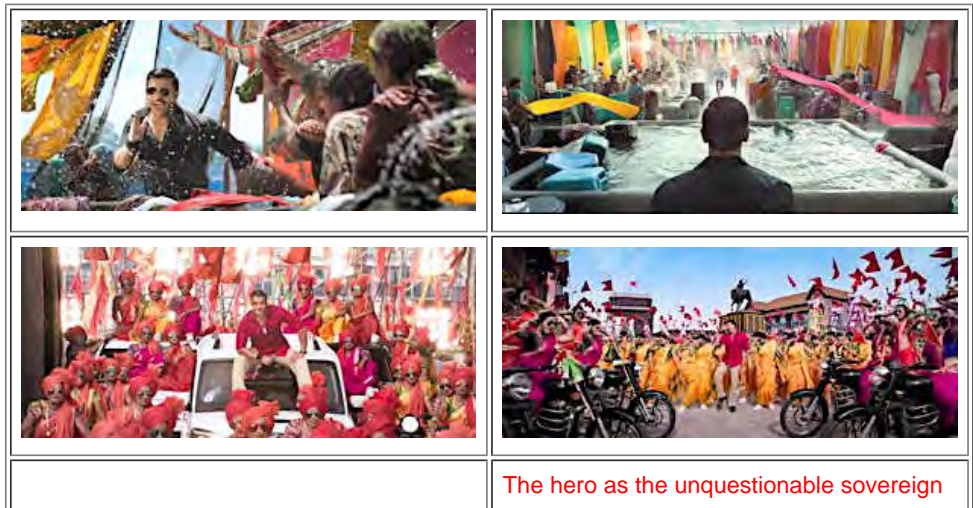


Simmba's poster offers a stark contrast between the foreground – the uniformed figure of authority – representing the background – the women who want to avenge their self-respect.

Even if the subjects have been treated variously, the rape-revenge plots as well as the cross-class Bombay romance have both been the staple diet of Hindi popular cinema for a long time. However, the habituation of film audiences to certain plot devices also enables popular cinema to use them without rendering their details. Thus, in many contemporary features, this second-order narration allows the fast blending of genres and plot designs. To cite one recent example, *Simmba* (2018) blends the rape-revenge plot with the vigilante action film, featuring the corrupt policeman as a maverick outlaw. Unlike *Sonchiriya*, the outlaw-protagonist does not speak on behalf of the political history of a region but acts as a usurper who harnesses already established public outrage about crimes such as corruption, rape, drug racket and child trafficking. Also unlike *Photograph*, there is nothing tentative about *Simmba's* retracing of a much-chartered territory.

The film features Simmba as a corrupt cop transferred to a Goan police station, where he busts parties and rackets to demand heavy bribes, but also builds patronizing bonds with several young women. One of these women, Akruti, learns about a drug racket run by Simmba's criminal-patrons and videotapes them, but ends up getting caught. Her rape and murder challenges Simmba's conscience who then resolves with his girlfriend Shagun to destroy Durva and his brothers. The film was marketed via many posters of the lead actor, Ranveer Singh, stylishly staring back at the camera, either shot from a low angle, or craning his neck backwards towards the audience, or standing feet wide apart with folded arms looking straight at us. This photographic portrait of an avenging icon appears purposefully isolated from its background. Blurring the film's subject to a blank and fetishizing its iconic object, the film navigates vigilante action cinema to mount the star.

The film is saturated with extreme low-angle shots reminiscent of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), but it goes much further to assemble what Madhava Prasad has called the *aesthetic of mobilization*. [22] Driven by the need to establish the vociferous endorsement of the icon by the masses, *Simmba* – similar to the *Baahubali* films (2015-2017) [23] – is marked by raucous and spectacular visuality. [[open endotes in new window](#)]

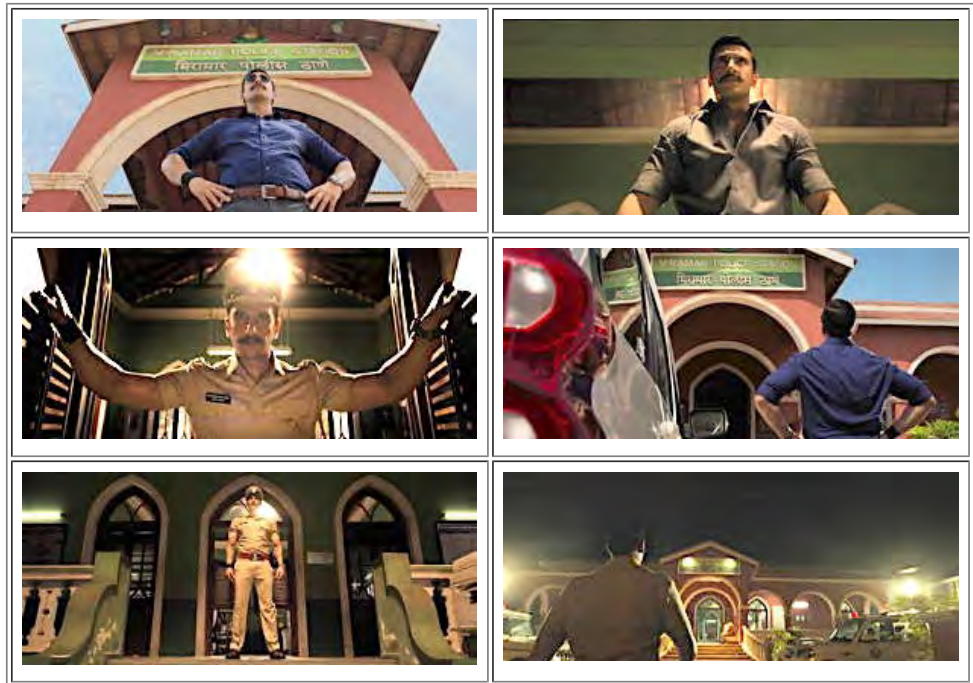


The hero as the unquestionable sovereign



authority supervising the eruption of mass support and mobilization. In this case, the historical sanction for this authority is presented via Maratha caste identity, of which the 17th century Maratha warrior-king Chhatrapati Shivaji remains the ultimate icon.

It stages numerous visual patterns scaled in rhythmic public endorsement of the icon during action and dance sequences – splashing water, waving flags, scores of flambeaus raised, naked gym-sculpted torsos, and high-angle shots of an automobile convoy. The film restlessly plays with extreme angles and distorted spatial economy expressed in slow motion photography, high angle shots of hundreds of bodies dancing in perfect unison, thousands of drummers and dancers shot from a low-angle camera panned to a high-angle, frontal slow-motion shots of Simmba in the middle of tens of goggled and sari-clad women.



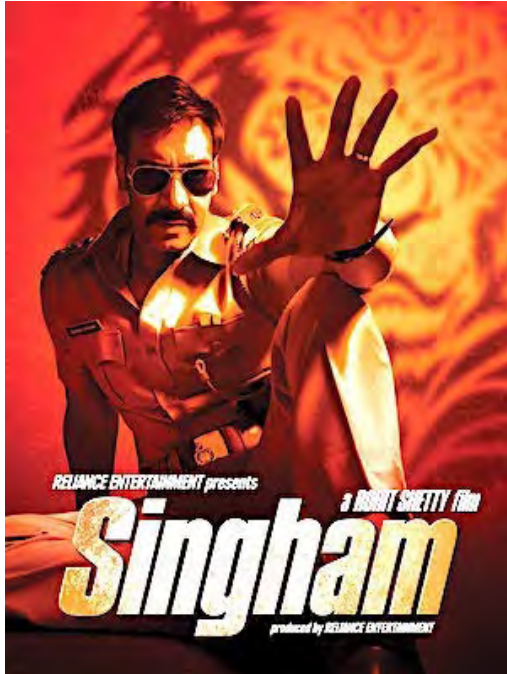
Simmba's cinematography is a collage of photographic signatures of sovereign authority that appears to be drawn from being the representative of the police force. However, the film uses the policing imagery to amplify what is distinctly vigilante justice.

Many of these shots are used for little more than stylized postures to illustrate the obedient submission of the masses to the icon. While the average shot length in much of Hindi action cinema has declined rapidly over the new millennium, the high shot density is multiplied here with shooting angles and slow-motion photography to squeeze a photographic effect out of the moving image.[24] In many of the shots the camera does far more work than the icon – while Simmba holds a steady threatening pose, the camera pans around him in various ways. While both *Sonchiriya* and *Photograph* deploy the spatial predicates to open up a field of enquiry, *Simmba's* self-congratulatory narration is cleansed of any ambiguities whatsoever. The latter only summons the masses to the *event* of justice delivery – a scheduled calendar event at the box-office.



The rape awakens Simmba's conscience and not only draws him out of his complicity with criminal quarters, but unleashes the vigilante within him to avenge the rape, as a uniformed outlaw, thereby making a case for fixed ends that justify any means.

For *Simmba*, revenge *is* justice. Portraying its lead protagonist as what Roy calls a “rape-diviner”, the film is only too eager to unleash the vigilante plot to appease the “collective conscience”. It is marked by a whole catalogue of hollow gesticulations, which chew out all the social complexities of the plot. No wonder,



Singham (2011) started a film franchise of which *Simmba* could be called an offshoot. The strategic appearance of Bajirao Singham, the lead character who inaugurated the Maratha pride parade, represents a patronage structure for Maratha pride in Hindi cinema with distinctly Marathi inflections



In an elaborate sequence staged to foreground the female voice of the town, *Simmba* crowd-sources the female validation of vigilante justice, before avenging the rape by tricking the rapists. This is how the audiences of *Simmba* are summoned to hail the *pronunciation* of a verdict already *enunciated*.

then, that *Simmba* has no spatial predicates to render. Nearly the entire film unfolds across four key sites, two of them – the police station and the *dhaba* are placed literally across the road. The other two are Durva's bungalow and the steps of a church where Akruti teaches orphaned children in the night. The elementary spatial imagination is representative of the film's pedestrian syntax.

Simmba is far more interested in establishing that it belongs to an elite lineage – or caste, perhaps – of muscular masculine celebrations of Maratha chauvinism and patriarchy, which are distinctly more insulted by rape than murder. These tendencies make it a direct descendant of two blockbusters by the same producer-director (Rohit Shetty): *Singham* (2011) and *Singham Returns* (2014).[25] *Simmba*'s play with extreme angles, color-coded masses following every jerk or twist of the icon, Sanskrit chanting on the soundtrack to suggest a religious ritual of justice, and vigilante vengeance – all are marked by orchestrated frontality. It foregrounds the industrial aesthetic of exploitative assembly-line production. Barely anyone except Simmba and Durva are capable of self-aware volition, in stark contrast with the characters of *Sonchiriya* and *Photograph*.

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| <p>The superimposition of Simmba's figurative authority upon Shivaji, using a statue installed in the town center, is repeatedly emphasized to underline the case for Maratha chauvinism.</p> | <p>In a moment of crisis, Simmba is visited and rescued by the star of Shetty's <i>Singham</i> franchise – Ajay Devgn. In this extreme low-angle, the film superimposes Simmba and Singham as heroic constituents of a cinematic landscape and lineage, in which caste solidarity and vigilante justice are re-dressed as the police force.</p> |

The audiences of *Simmba* are therefore summoned to hail the *pronunciation* of a verdict already *enunciated* – leaving no space between the two to be negotiated in the narrative action. Even though the Swiss Alps appear in the backdrop of the song *Tere Bin*, and the film uses several top-angle shots of the Goan countryside and the town, they do not reflect, or are integrated within, the spatial language of the film itself. Situating the spatial predicates of this mainstream blockbuster in relation to the outliers, *Sonchiriya* and *Photograph*, reveals the tension between cinematic narration and spatial adventure in Hindi popular cinema. Indeed, this tension is significantly owed to the over-reliance of the film business upon stars and the city of Mumbai.

This scenario has shifted with the emergence of multiplex-malls, the commercial viability of small-budget films without major stars, and the widespread interest in not only alternative “settings” but also engaging with the spatio-cultural terms of regions outside Mumbai.[26] Yet, *Sonchiriya* and *Photograph* offer to Hindi cinema rare terms of engagement with landscapes – via debt, memory and deliberations of justice as well as photographic surplus – and the travails of dwelling in them.

Conclusion

The case of *Simmba* illustrates how feverishly popular cinema is gripped by the total convergence of the icon and the field of enquiry, leaving us with the star-body and its gesticulations as the primary landscape to traverse. This shows how



It was in the 1960s that panoramic landscape began its life in Hindi cinema as a classic setting for a romantic escapade. *Kashmir ki Kali* (1964) was one of the earliest films that inaugurated the trend, often featuring the lush Kashmir valley and European destinations (see Note 18). The destination shooting all over Europe - and later in the U.S., South Africa, Australia and New Zealand - became an essential routine in the new millennium, even for relatively smaller films, after the success of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1996); *Simmba*'s use of the Swiss Alps as a romantic setting is situated within this trajectory.

popular cinema and its audiences are trapped in a self-referential loop. This loop is perfectly capable of importing all manner of backdrops and “settings” to establish its transnational, global or provincial credentials. However, there is little reason for this established presentation – revolving around the star-body – to absorb new spatial predicates since they may destabilize the convenient self-referential structure.



The song in *Simmba* takes us to the Swiss Alps where the couple romance in the cradle of what appears to be a virgin and orderly landscape, the exact opposite of the Goan town where most of the action takes place.

Sonchiriya and *Photograph* are remarkable interventions within the cultural arena since they help the viewer step out of popular cinema’s self-reference and take cognizance of not only the industrial-entertainment commonsense, but also its various debts. This reflexive reckoning occasions the viewers to take stock of their cinematic, and by extension social, habituation. The slow emergence of films which attend to the spatial predicates of narration has identified resources which may be vital for recasting cinema’s afflictions with the iconic and the spectacular. As I have shown, in the absence of vital cinematic landscapes, cinema’s spatial reckoning is set aside to capture and animate the foreground with frivolous second-order topological adjustments. The return to the spaces in which characters and their aspirations actually dwell helps us see beyond popular cinema’s spectacular shot-designs, so as to critically reckon with the kinetic energy that does not compensate for a certain kind of emaciation.

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Notes

Acknowledgements: This essay is dedicated to Irrfan Khan, a much-loved actor who passed away in 2020, while I was rewriting this essay. His memorable performance as Paan Singh Tomar, the soldier-athlete turned *baaghi* of Chambal valley immortalized in Tigmanshu Dhulia's film, has guided the spirit of my writing. The author is immensely grateful to the anonymous referee for helpful suggestions, and the painstaking attention to every detail by the editor of *Jump Cut*, Julia Lesage. The responsibility for the errors, if any, lies with the author.

1. The debate on frontality in Indian cinema is an old one, overlapping with some of the originary concerns about the predominance of devotional motifs in Indian visual culture at large. The frontal encounter with the deity-like stars was widely read as a feature of Hindu religious culture flowing into Hindi cinema. Madhava Prasad has however rescued the debate from the culturalist trap to argue that the frontality of the iconic image follows from the despotic authority coded within social hierarchy, which cinema harvests to visually mount a figure of not religious but political pre-eminence. See M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998 [[return to page 1](#)]
2. Akshaya Kumar, 'The Popular Aesthetics of Social Mobility', *Economic and Political Weekly* vol 55, no 31, 2020, pp 46-52.
3. See Ravinder Kaur, *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First-Century India*. Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 2020.
4. See Tejaswini Ganti, 'Fuzzy Numbers: The Productive Nature of Ambiguity in the Hindi Film Industry', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* vol 35, no 3, 2015, pp 451-465
5. Akshaya Kumar, 'Animated Visualities and Competing Sovereignties: The Formal Dwellings of Hindi Cinema', *Social Text* vol 35, no 3 (132), 2017, pp 41-70; Akshaya Kumar, 'Media Portfolios after Credit-Scoring: Attention, Prediction and Advertising in Indian Media Networks', *Postmodern Culture* vol 28, no 2, 2018, Project MUSE, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/709897>.
6. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977 [1972]
7. Bhaskar Sarkar has argued that popular cinema in the wake of the 1947 Partition, at the cusp of the independence from two centuries of colonial rule, has allegorically mourned the traumatic loss of a stable belonging within the freshly cast, but permanently amputated nation. Indian cinema has adeptly deployed narrative subterfuge to avoid directly referencing the emotional upheaval; in effect, it has been lastingly shaped by the suspended mourning between remembering and forgetting. See Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2009

8. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1995
9. Chris Lukinbeal, 'Cinematic Landscapes', *Journal of Cultural Geography* vol 23, no 1, 2005, p 14
10. Martin Lefebvre, 'Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema', *Landscape and Film*, Ed. Martin Lefebvre, Routledge, New York and London, 2006, p 51
11. Martin Lefebvre, 'Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema', *Landscape and Film*, Ed. Martin Lefebvre, Routledge, New York and London, 2006, p 22
12. Martin Lefebvre, 'On Landscape in Narrative Cinema', *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* vol 20, no 1, 2011, p 64
13. See Akshaya Kumar, 'Animated Visualities and Competing Sovereignities: The Formal Dwellings of Hindi Cinema', *Social Text* vol 35, no 3 (132), 2017, pp 41-70
14. Arundhati Roy, 'The Great Indian Rape-Trick, Parts I and II', *Sunday Magazine*, 22 August and 3 September, 1994 [[return to page 2](#)]
15. Lalitha Gopalan, 'Avenging Women in Indian Cinema', *Screen* vol 38, no 1, 1997, pp 42-59
16. Lalitha Gopalan, 'Avenging Women in Indian Cinema', *Screen* vol 38, no 1, 1997, p 48
17. Whether or not *Bandit Queen* can be redeemed against the charge of exploitation cinema, its vociferous staging of reality may not be fundamentally different from that of *Insaaf ka Tarazu*. The use of newspaper, vital to the vociferous staging of reality in the latter, could be just as effective as naked bottoms thrusting on top of Phoolan in a long shot for their apparent reality effect. Yet, *Bandit Queen* remains, for many in the Hindi film industry, the benchmark for realism, and for giving its due to a landscape by rescuing it from being a mere setting. *Sonchiriya* also upholds *Bandit Queen* as the ur-text of the Chambal valley. Tigmanshu Dhulia, an assistant director on the sets, famously learned the story of Paan Singh during its shoot and went on to research further before making his biopic. *Sonchiriya* also does a playful rejigging of two key characters from *Bandit Queen* without making its debt explicit. The film features both Phoolan Devi and Man Singh, one of her lovers, while Manoj Bajpai plays Man Singh in both the films. Bajpai's presence as Man Singh is a direct reference to *Bandit Queen*, the film and the queen of the ravines.
18. The explosion of films set in Kashmir in the 1960s – such as *Jungle* (1961), *Kashmir ki Kali* (1964), *Himalay ki God Mein* (1965), *Aarzoo* (1965), *Mere Sanam* (1965), *Janwar* (1965) and *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965) – had much to do with a general fascination with traveling, aviation, fashion and global consumption. See Ranjani Mazumdar, 'Aviation, Tourism and Dreaming in 1960s Bombay Cinema', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* vol 2, no 2, 2011, pp 129-155
19. Kathryn Hansen, 'Sultānā the Dacoit and Harishchandra: Two Popular Dramas of the Nautankī Tradition of North India', *Modern Asian Studies* vol 17, no 2, 1983, pp 313-331
20. One could indeed recall a recent big-budget film, *Thugs of Hindostan* (2018), which lavishly mounted an explicit postcolonial spin on dubious historical grounds. The rebels of eighteenth century in the film make a bid to free India from the colonial clutches. While retrofitting the postcolonial narratives into an often misunderstood political history, the film failed to either sufficiently allegorize the subject or historicize it.

21. In fact, Batra's previous Hindi film, *The Lunchbox* (2013), also revolves around a chance encounter in which a woman's lunchbox meant for her husband mistakenly gets delivered to a stranger, who then begins a lettered communication via paper chits inserted into the lunchbox.

22. Prasad's aesthetic of mobilization is simultaneously a recipe for stardom and populist rhetoric to summon the masses, fashioning subaltern characters as heroic representatives of their abstracted community. See M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998

23. The two-part *Baahubali* blockbuster was simultaneously released in Telugu, Tamil and Hindi (dubbed). A rare south Indian blockbuster to make massive headway into north Indian markets, the film was marked by heavy CGI animations to mount the franchise's epic narrative and visual scaling. I have argued elsewhere that Baahubali franchise demonstrated how a certain degree of spectacularity could bypass the problem of stardom-centric division of labour in Indian film industries. See Akshaya Kumar, 'Consolidating Bollywood: Spectacularity Without Stardom', *Pop Empires: Transnational and Diasporic Flows of India and Korea*, Eds Sharon Heijin Lee, Monika Mehta, and Robert Ji-Song Ku, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2019, pp 138-154
[\[return to page 3\]](#)

24. Akshaya Kumar, 'Animated Visualities and Competing Sovereignities: The Formal Dwellings of Hindi Cinema', *Social Text* vol 35, no 3 (132), 2017, pp 41-70

25. The surprise intervention at the climax by Ajay Devgn (the actor who plays Bajirao Singham in the two *Singham* films), apart from the fact that his voice-over introduces the film, puts the emphasis on continuity within the action-comedy lineage.

26. Akshaya Kumar, 'Provincialising Bollywood? Cultural economy of north-Indian small-town nostalgia in the Indian multiplex', *South Asian Popular Culture* vol 11, no 1, 2013, pp 61-74

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Protagonist Radha is a metaphor of land and the nation in *Mother India* (1957).



Shambhu Mahato and other farmers discuss the landlord's plan of building a factory on their land in *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953).



Shambhu Mahato refuses to sell his land.

New Cinema Movement and the "no land's man": questions of land in *Ankur* and *Aakrosh*

by [Soumya Suvra Das](#)

Tracing the "no land's man" before the advent of the late sixties

Moving from Eric Hobsbawm to Benedict Anderson to Partha Chatterjee, the concept of “nation” has referred to a collective historical identity that became an instrument of resistance against colonial and theocratic oppressions, giving rise to sovereign citizenship and a state. Virdi (1993) refers to Iain Chambers' *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Post-modernism* (1990) as she interprets popular Hindi cinema's portrayal of nation in terms of the cultural and political imagination of the ruling elites. [\[open references and endnotes in new window\]](#) She points out how cultural artefacts and non-print media create an “elite hegemony” of the ruling class. In this way they endorse a kind of nationalism that remains in a constant process of reinventing itself. Land remains at the heart of this process of creation and re-creation of an Indian identity even after independence. Land and its meaning undergo negotiations with structures of power either by consolidating or providing challenges to that power.

Two significant films, taken as representatives of the era of post-independence land reforms, clearly indicate how 50s Hindi films attempted to address the land question as a locus of national identity. In one, Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* of 1957, the spirit of a unified geo-political identity lies in the motherhood of a peasant woman representing the holy land, a place (Nehru's "Bharat Mata") where people share an organic relation to the land irrespective of diverse ethnicities and differences in culture. That film overtly disseminated a sense of pride in national identity by affirming an enduring memory of the past as the nation's unique and quintessential identity while envisioning a present based on consent to a common life. French philosopher Ernst Renan would view this as a nation and its people committed to a “large-scale solidarity.”

On the other hand, Bimal Roy's 1953 classic *Do Bigha Zameen* rejected that kind of projected nationalist imagination because it diffused questions of land ownership. Roy's film interrogated the very state of “peasantry” and its plight within India's transitional society, one of bourgeois dominance of the ruling elites of the Indian National Congress. Unlike *Mother India*, Bimal Roy's film excluded iconic images of land reform's historical success under the new government. Rather, *Do Bigha Zameen* depicted common peasants' plight in India's new era of capitalist development as a sovereign state. The concept of land was converted into some sort of a property, something which can be measured in terms of money. That denoted a huge change in the Indian way of life and how people



One of the most significant actors of India, Balraj Sahani playing the character of Shambhu in *Do Bigha Zameen*, is turned into an urban labourer (rickshaw puller) in the city after he is ousted from his land.



Poster of *Dharti Ke Lal*.

looked at land. In the story arc of this film, Shambhu Mahato, the protagonist of *Do Bigha Zameen*, considers his land to be a mother. But in order to pay off his debt, he is forced to sell his two acres of land. The businessman and the moneylender force Shambhu to sell off his land and become a labourer, dispossessing him from his own way of life. Shambhu denies such a proposition claiming his land to be his mother. “By selling the land,” the businessman, grabbing Shambhu's land, says with a sneering laugh, “the mother will become the father.”

A similar theme is traced in *Dharti Ke Laal*, a film made by K.A. Abbas in 1946 using a backdrop of the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 that claimed the lives of millions. In this first feature film made under the banner of IPTA —Indian Peoples Theatre Association, the oldest cultural forum initiated by the Communist Party of India—the Samaddars, a family of farmers, join an exodus of the peasant community to the city in search of food, eventually becoming part of the reserve army of labour [1] similar to the Mahatos in *Do Bigha Zameen*.

Historically, the fate of India's agricultural community-at-large came about through deep-seated changes in the nature of capitalism that took place toward the end of the nineteenth century. The question of land relations as portrayed in cinema cannot be understood without looking at the political economy of the land laws passed by the British in India. These laws, the most prominent of all being the Permanent Settlement, not only shaped national consciousness but aided the formation of a new hegemonic class. With this kind of political process at work, where a traditional community undergoes an historical change, a displacement where modernity with all its trajectories opens new ways of seeing life, it became a progressive imperative to locate the people of the land as legitimate/legitimized citizens of the nation. For the purpose of this essay, I have coined a term for the peasantry in their new status in a pun on the common term: no-man's-land. Here, the appellation "no land's man" delineates a category of the transitional peasantry in its historical specificity. In this light, *Dharti Ke Laal* is one of the first Indian films trying to use cinema as a vehicle for social, historical and political consciousness. This script not only traces the plight of the modern day peasant-turned-labourer, but directs the struggles of these "no land's men" (the peasant community along with the Samaddar family) toward collectivity, thus keeping their faith in a socialist future (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1995).



Shambhu and his family looking at the construction of the mill on their own land in *Do Bigha Zameen*.



Bhookha Hain Bangal (Bengal is hungry) song in *Dharti Ke Laal* directs the struggles of these "no land's men" (the peasant community along with the Samaddar family) towards collectivity, keeping their faith in a socialist future. Image from Nivedita Ramakrishnan in her blog <http://cinemacorridor.blogspot.com>.



Locus of a new industrial India as seen through Transitional Cinema—race between two protagonists in imported cars through the developing city of Bombay in *Waqt* (1963).



Opulence of the progressive Indians in *Waqt* (1963).



The aristocracy of the progressive Indians as imagined in *Waqt* (1963).

In the late 1950s this new urban identity of the erstwhile landless peasants failed to make itself relevant in the popular imagination of Hindi Cinema in the wake of the Second Five Year Plan. Concerns over peasantry, who were the locus of national identity, faced a complete erasure in popular cinema from the late 1950s to the end of the next decade. Prioritizing industrial development by the Indian State became the ideological foregrounding of a new bourgeois cinema that saw the emergence of some sort of a class interest divorced from agrarian concerns. Popular Hindi cinema of the 60s became obsessed with a certain bourgeois nationalism that also influenced the way it saw land relations and patterns of ownership. From *Mother India* in 1957 to *Waqt* in 1963, Hindi cinema saw a stark visual shift with a rural mise-en-scene, giving way to urban spectacles of the new bourgeoisie.


This shift can be analyzed through Partha Chatterjee's reading of Nehruvian development: that is, films provided an imaginary path, a “new theoretical work” for the necessary reconstruction of the very idea of nationalism. For Chatterjee, rapid industrialization aided by the vehemence of state-capitalism shaped a notion of two large groups/classes—a progressive one (the group which aligned itself with the scientific and economic interest of the Nehruvian equations of national development) and a reactionary one (a group which did not align itself with such aspirations). The political economy's transition from the fifties to the sixties has been called Passive Revolution (Prasad 1998) and notably this period saw the emergence of what Vasudevan would call Transitional Cinema.

In Transitional Cinema, issues of agrarian reforms, peasantry, and consciousness of rural life ceased to dominate India's projected national character. Chatterjee's category of progressive Indians seemed to be the future of the nation. This class began to manifest itself in popular films through characters who were closely linked to the newly formed institutions of the state (the judicial and the military) along with industrialists who were elite upper-caste Hindus. This burgeoning script emphasis in transitional cinema turned land into an absent entity in Hindi films for years to come. Protagonists hailing from bourgeois background turned out to be the only existing class to focus on within the rapidly developing nation. Most of them were shown as descendants of righteous landlords who have become industrialists in this new era of capitalist development.

In this light, transitional cinema saw the rise of the family romance—a self-sustained genre that revolved around love stories, inevitably culminating in marriage. Families, family secrets, family inheritance and lineage played a key role in the resolution of such narratives. A kind of sub-genre, which Rajadhyaksha calls “lost-and-found,” became a popular trope in family romance where revelation of the protagonist's royal inheritance became a marker of his social acceptance; such a story arc resulted in a narrative resolution devoid of critical or historical interrogation. Transitional Cinema treated questions of inheritance and ownership of land as ahistorical, something that is natural, heralding the emergence and legitimacy of this new class.

Nasir Hussain's *Tumsa Nahin Dekha* in 1957 and *Dil Deke Dekho* in 1959 and Shakti Samanta's *Kashmir Ki Kali* in 1964 are some of the major hits of this genre, with Shammi Kapoor starring in the lead in all of them.



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| <p>Shammi Kapoor discovering that he has royal blood in his vein in <i>Tumsa Nahi Dekha</i> (1957).</p> | <p>Shammi Kapoor as the successor of a royal family in <i>Dil Deke Dekho</i> (1959).</p> |



The imagological “other” tribal community with protagonist Kishore Kumar to the extreme right. He will turn out to be the lost child of the royal educated family in *Jhumroo* (1961).



The stereotypical Indian tribesman in contrast to the 'progressive' bourgeois protagonist in *Tumsa Nahi Dekha* (1957).

In *Tumsa Nahi Dekha* (1957) and few years later in Shankar Mukherjee's *Jhumroo* (1961), an imagology (a term borrowed from literature referring to an ideological kind of imagery) depicts certain communities of local tribes, feeding the audience with a socio-political construct of these marginalised communities through presenting a pattern of image culture, thereby evoking ideas of stereotypes and giving rise to imaginations, ideas and *Vorstellungsbilder* (performance pictures) in order to create national typological fictions (Beller 2007). The habitats of tribal and rural communities get reduced to mere visual pleasure, and the films' settings are turned into exotic locations, where the Hindi-speaking protagonists have their adventures. In films like *Tumsa Nahin Dekha* or *Jhumroo*, an entire tribal community is mocked at and caricatured, their leaders often shown as goons; their only narrative purpose is limited to action sequences with elite, righteous protagonists. Their engagement with the new nation that aspires to be industrious became “weak” in the sense that the lifestyles, values and concerns of these marginalised communities become irrelevant to the larger goal of nation-building.

As is clear, these ideologically manipulated representations of a marginalised “other” were paired with dominant, monolithic representations of the Hindi speaking, educated, progressive, Hindu, bourgeois protagonists owning the stakes of a modern nation. Such protagonists continue to dominate the mise-en-scene and scripts of Vijay Bhatt's *Hariyali Aur Raasta*, Lekh Tandon's *Professor* (both in 1962), Samanta's *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964) and B.R.Chopra's *Humraaz* (1967). The property-owning elites not only own erstwhile peasant lands but also have a territorial ownership over historically disputed regions of India, like Kashmir and Darjeeling [2]. For instance, in *Humraaz*, lands of working-class ethnic groups of Darjeeling are represented-under-erasure through the plot device of a military takeover. The film depicts a military contractor who loves to hold boisterous drinking parties for his army officer friends on his lavish property yet whose aim is to keep his daughter from marrying someone in the army, as he wants a son-in-law to whom he can hand over his estate.

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Exotic Darjeeling locale as a theme in the upper class drama of *Hariyali Aur Rasta* (1962).



The protagonist with the lush mountains of Darjeeling in the background of *Hariyali Aur Rasta* (1962).



Protagonist in the film *Professor* (1962) visiting the Royal Mansion of a Hindi speaking elite woman in Darjeeling.



The military contractor is partying with his army friends and talking about his business in Darjeeling in the film *Humraz* (1967).



The protagonist in *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964), son of the owner of a mill taking responsibility for the business, here addressing the labourers in the most benevolent way.

This form of bourgeois cinema created a certain abstraction of national identity that suppressed other identities, the "no land's man," either through stereotyping (through imagologies) or through absence. However, the opacity of such national bourgeois culture then came under harsh interrogation by the films of the New Cinema Movement (henceforth NCM) which can be said to have revived the question of the "no land's man." That is, it critiqued the very legitimacy of the Nehruvian project as well as the tropes of Transitional Cinema that dominated mainstream culture till the late sixties.

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A sketch named *Naxalbari* (named after the Naxalbari Movement of India) by the Indian revolutionary painter Chittaprasad.



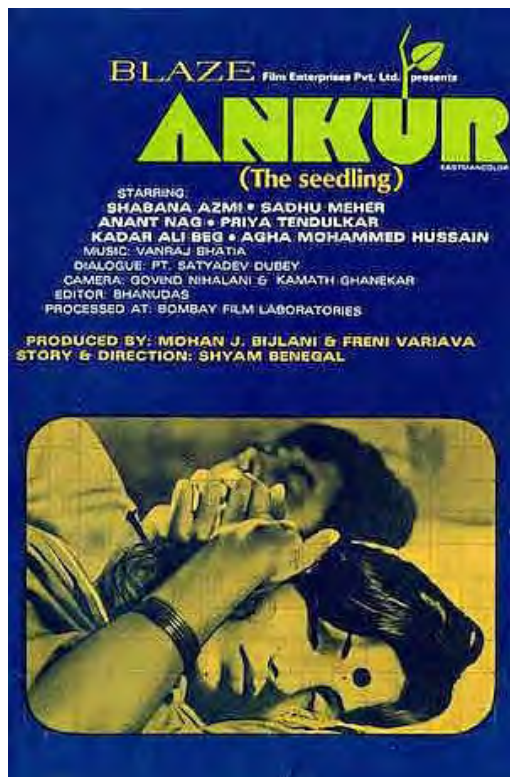
Proletarianisation of the superstar through Amitabh Bachchan in *Deewar* (1975).

New Cinema Movement (NCM) and the "No Land's Man"

Kalyan Sanyal in his *Rethinking Capitalist Development* (2007) states how a process through which imperialist penetration in a third world economy selects a few segments (like the agrarian and artisanal societies) of the pre-existing economic formation for transformation, including the division of labour that remains associated with it. Transformation occurs in those selected sectors that could provide raw materials for a capitalist mode of production. This creates excessively uneven development by displacing peasants from their primary means of production. In reaction, such a development eventually leads forces of traditional modes of production to put up resistance against such expansion. The "no land's men" are a group who belongs to this sector, who are left as a residue in the continual process of land-grabbing. In India, they formed the backbone of the Naxalbari Movement [3] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) during the seventies, when state-capitalism led to what David Harvey termed "accumulation by dispossession" (2003).

Named after the district in West Bengal, the flames of Naxalbari peasant rebellion spread like a forest fire in the middle of 1967. Peasants had already formed village committees for reclaiming the lands that had been taken from them. Scholars like Bernard D' Mello in his *India after Naxalbari: Unfinished History* (2018) finds the movement to be India's "1968" [4] of revolutionary humanism. But what is important here in the context of Indian popular cinema is how the Naxalbari Movement brought about a change in the way we perceive the nation. This happened through the cinematic imaginations of New Indian Cinema, irrespective of the fact that Prasad terms it as a cinema of containment (Prasad 1998). The film industry's response, as Madhava Prasad finds, was an internal segmentation that led to the establishment of New Cinema on one hand and a middleclass or the middlebrow cinema on the other. An "aesthetic mobilisation" was being forged by the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) that tried to fuse the binary between the spectatorial aspiration and state-intervention. Finally the FFC created its third segment via a politically charged negotiation with state-form and the political disequilibrium by using the star image of Amitabh Bachchan (Prasad 1998). My point of departure would be to locate the "no land's man" in some filmic narratives under the NCM that distanced themselves from the aesthetics of middle-class cinema made by directors like Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee.

Moinak Biswas has discussed how official archives of Indian history have for a long time deliberately avoided any record that would reflect presence of a subaltern mind. New historians like Ranajit Guha, Kalyan Sanyal and Partha Chatterjee re-read these official documents "against the grain" which unravel traces of subaltern consciousness (Biswas2020). A sense of history that colonial and even postcolonial writing has created reverberates in the same vein in commercial Hindi films too, until 1968, a year significant for more than one reason. Echoing Simon Gunn's views of "history from below" (Gunn 2014) which aims to make the voices of the marginalised audible in the elite dominance over the Indian national narrative, advent of films like *Ankur* (1974) and *Aakrosh* (1980) brought to the fore a poignant history of the marginalised who were hardly



Poster of Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974).



Poster of Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980).

seen in transitional cinema of the sixties. (Image#22 + Image#23)

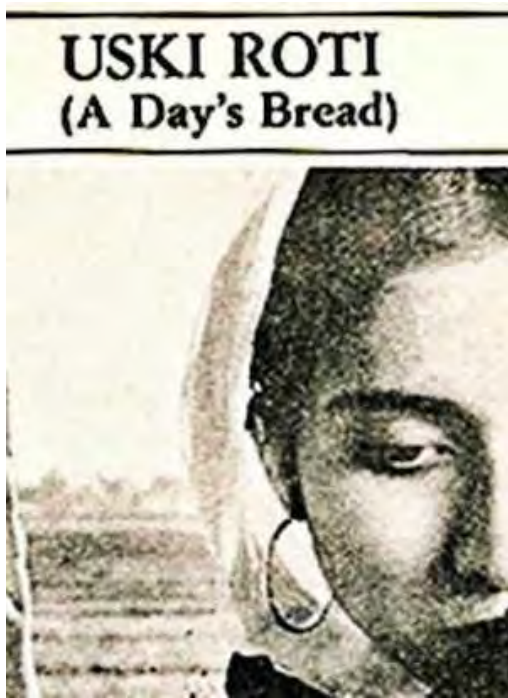
Before excavating the factors behind the ideological and formal aesthetics of NCM, one must recall the political turmoil that India was engulfed in—the Moplah rebellion of Malabar [5], the Bardoli Satyagraha [6], the Tebhaga Movement [7], and of course, the Naxalite movement. Within this environment of the late sixties, the NCM manifesto written by Arun Kaul and Mrinal Sen was released in the year 1968 (republished in 2014 in Scott MacKenzie's *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*). Instead of maintaining a distance from the mainstream and the popular films in Hindi, NCM vowed to reflect a conscious reaction to it (Ghosh 2011). Critiquing thoughtlessness in mainstream film culture, the manifesto proclaimed the need for a “better cinema” and it explained and advocated for assimilating international film cultures:

“This New Cinema Movement (NCM), as it might be termed has manifested itself through the ‘New Wave’ in France, the ‘underground’ in America, and yet other yet unlabelled currents in other countries. The time for launching such a movement in India is now ripe, for, we believe, that the climate needed to nourish it obtains today” (Kaul and Sen 1968).

The time that Kaul and Sen are talking about, when they see the need to launch such a “conscious” cinema movement, is stated clearly in the manifesto. The year 1968 was one of the most significant periods in the world across nations, including India following the 1967 Naxal uprising. Kaul and Sen use the claims of an authorial signature to provide legitimacy for artistic expression and creative freedom, something which will no more be limited by equations of studios and production houses. They further declare,

“New Cinema stands for a film ‘with a signature.’ New Cinema engages itself in a ruthless search for ‘truth’ as an individual artist sees it. New Cinema lays stress on the right questions and bothers less about the right answers. New Cinema believes in looking fresh at everything including old values and in probing deeper everything, including the mind and the conditions of man” (Kaul and Sen 1968).

The “truth” that NCM manifesto talks about is not limited to the ambits of the aesthetic mode of realist representation under the statist gaze, but also implicitly refers to the political excesses of the time (Prasad 1998). Although Prasad looks at NCM as a state-controlled aesthetic program without any other attribute, the manifesto released in 1968 clearly prescribes a certain version of “truth” that the



Uski Roti (1969) by Mani Kaul—one of the key films of New Cinema Movement. Photo: Cinestaan.



Legendary actor Utpal Dutta playing the title character in *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) by Mrinal Sen—one of the first films of New Cinema Movement.



A working still from *Aakrosh* (picture Courtesy

filmmakers of the movement were regarding in terms of their own artistic perception. Two major points found in the NCM manifesto would affect both form and content. The first is that of raising question rather than seeking answers, implying a polemical structure that would go against the very aesthetics of popular representations. Such polemic, for example, is deeply woven into the phrase “conditions of man,” entailing the very material aspect of the conditions of existence. The second aspect of the manifesto is that it challenges the aesthetics of representation in terms of ideology. The words “looking fresh at everything including old values” make it evident that their films would examine structural discrimination such as class, caste, and gender.

Using a rural landscape in the first half of NCM becomes a key cinematic figuration of its mise-en-scene. Apart from Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti* (1969) that operates on a different plane of territorial realism, Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) and Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974) investigate the ideological terrain of the rural-urban dialogue in terms of how different sectors perceive land. The aesthetics of placing films in varied rural landmasses contributes as a key factor to some NCM films. The scripts inevitably raise direct as well as indirect questions of land and its relation to marginalised communities in various parts of India in a new way. However, this did not mean that the NCM directors stood apart from the FFC. For Prasad, for example, Benegal “forged” a developmental aesthetic that appropriated regional realism and proclaimed to be “political cinema par excellence.” In alliance with the developmental aesthetic that FFC had created, Prasad puts Benegal along with other NCM filmmakers in a position of appropriating the statist gaze. For their purpose of creating a national cinema backed by the state, NCM created a spectatorial position exploiting regional realism. In hindsight, it should also be mentioned here, as Rajadhyaksha in his *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid* (2009) observes, FFC's exploitative opportunism of turning young filmmakers into producers themselves forced committed artists of NCM to take loans by mortgaging their personal belongings. However, Prasad reads FFC's involvement in state control of film aesthetics as a sort of “research and development” which in turn enhanced mainstream film production to assimilate aesthetic strategies and exploit a spectatorial position of dissent and social realism in the turbulent decade of the seventies.

Coming back to the question of land and land relations in the context of NCM, I posit that films like *Ankur* and Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* are open to further re-readings beyond a limited and simplistic explanation of their alliance with the statist gaze of realist aesthetics. In one of the seminars on “Looking Back at the Indian New Wave (or NCM)” organised by the University of Chicago in the year 2015, Rajadhyaksha points out some key perspectives on NCM that bails the film movement out of the dismissals presented by Prasad previously in his work (1998). For him, the idea of the national in NCM films did not sit well with the agenda of the state. He also pointed out that there has not been a single national cinema under a single homogeneous project; rather, there are multiple national cinemas in India. This makes the cinema of NCM national indeed, but a specific national cinema that invests deeply in its regionalism, creating a spectrum of national cinemas (Rajadhyaksha 2015). A deliberate creation of national *cinemas* eludes a monolithic idea of the nation.[8] NCM's political films invest into what may be called a realist metaphor—realist in terms of film language and a film style endorsed by the state following Satyajit Ray's international recognition for using the standardised tropes of realism. For instance, following the peasant uprisings of Andhra Pradesh, *Ankur*'s untouchable landless working-class woman

NFAI).

(who makes the character triply marginalized while ironically named after a Hindu goddess of prosperity) becomes a metaphor of land exploited by the landowning class. For me, it is therefore irrelevant whether the films of NCM were the result of statist gaze or not because the very question of land that was long lost and eclipsed by transitional cinema in the previous decade is now brought to the forefront once again.



Shabana Azmi playing the untouchable, landless, working-class Laxmi in *Ankur* (1974).



Om Puri as the tribal rebel Bhiku Lahania who is silenced by the forces of the bourgeois state in *Aakorsh* (1980).

Images from *Ankur*, dir. Shyam Benegal (1974).



Laxmi is a landless woman who serves the upper-caste liberal yet patrilineal landlord Surya, played by Anant Nag.



The marginalised Dalit couple Laxmi and Kishtayya.

Ankur and the dawn of rebellion

Ankur, Shyam Benegal's most celebrated film (1974), saw a process of consolidating a production process with realist aesthetics, that is, in terms of organizing the stylistic principles on which NCM was based. Although Benegal's first two films (*Ankur* in 1974 and *Nishant* in 1975) followed the path of political cinema under NCM, they were not the products of the state but were produced by an advertising company called Blaze, with which Benegal had made a few commercials earlier. What makes Shyam Benegal stand apart artistically is his treatment of land relations. He employs a set of parallels about land in his narrative strategy, especially in *Ankur*. He establishes intersectional ties and complexities between rural/feudal land relations, on one hand, and a metaphoric representation of woman as the land on the other; the theme of gender enters the broader thematic structure of the narrative as a secondary motif. *Ankur*, for Madhava Prasad, indicates how a director can commercially exploit the political dimension of the FFC's aesthetic project (1998). For him, the feudal plots work as a "spectacle of rebellion," a narrative set in the past only to reinstall the present's social contract. Prasad has a significant meaning for "pastness" as he uses a feudal setting:

"The date is simply a device of distancing that enables the spectator to gain access to the fascination and power of the spectacle of the feudal oppression and rebellion without being reminded of its proximity in time and space, without undermining the realist spectatorial position" (1998).

Emerging out of such a narrative is the "no land's man," rather it should be said in Benegal's case, the "no land's woman." Prasad argues that *Ankur's* plot uses temporal distancing to create a spectator position oblivious of the proximities of such exploitations and rebellions, but I find that that argument does not hold strong ground because of the very nature of the realist strategy that Benegal's film employs. In an interview, Benegal stated that he wanted to give the film a sense of temporality by situating its plot in a village near Telengana. That means that the space of *Ankur's* narrative is not far from the city of Srikakulam, the place where the Srikakulam Peasant Uprising [10] took place from 1967 to 1970 following the footsteps of Naxalbari in Bengal. *Ankur's* narrative is only a little deferred in terms of historical temporality. It does not take place in an a historical past that



Kishtayya's punishment.



Surya's gaze (POV) on Laxmi.



Close up of Surya gazing at Laxmi.



Surya gazing at Kishtayya in the background as

bears no relevance to the political conditions of contemporary times or political awareness among spectators. Space, as we know, is a social construct (and not a mere geographical landmass) that is defined by fixed social relations while also creating new ones. *Ankur's* diegetic space becomes a historical space of relations between a landless working class and a landowner's liberal yet patrilineal progeny Surya, just another representative of the same feudal tradition. The setting becomes significant as a site of a disrupted and a disturbing historical moment that encounters the seed of rebellion by the landless and Dalits.

Before delving into the nature of such a complicated representation of an "othered" space in *Ankur*, one must locate these issues in the specificity of the script. Surya, the son of an absentee landlord comes to a village in Andhra Pradesh to look after his vast land. A Dalit couple, Lakshmi and Kishtayya, (who are shown anxious to have their first child), start working for the new and seemingly liberal landlord. (Later critics have speculated regarding the caste portrayal of the "Kumhars"—Lakshmi and Kishtayya—as Dalits [9].) The caste of Laxmi (the protagonist) and her mute husband Kishtayya is pivotal to the plot. Dominance of caste in shaping Indian social structure affects the material aspect of the conditions of existence even to this day. Being untouchable Dalits, Laxmi and Kishtayya can own no land, are not allowed to touch those who belong to the upper caste, and do not have a right to raise their voice against the age-old atrocities against their community. Such an historical silencing is used as a metaphor in Kishtayya's muteness (which can also be seen in the tribal character in *Aakrosh*, discussed later in the essay). Laxmi's caste establishes one of the decisive factors in her multilayered marginalisation, along with her gender and class position.

After Kishtayya's disappearance following his humiliation for stealing meager produce from Surya's tree, Surya seduces Lakshmi who starts living with him as his mistress. But after Surya's newly-wed wife comes to the village to stay with him, Surya is forced to abandon Lakshmi only after making Lakshmi pregnant. Surya's constant pressure on Lakshmi to abort the child does not work. One fine morning Kishtayya comes back and is overjoyed when he finds that Lakshmi is bearing a child. As Kishtayya approaches the landlord Surya with jovial innocence, the latter thinks that Lakshmi's rustic husband would unleash his agony for all the oppressions poured on the Dalit couple. In a frightful retaliation, Surya starts beating Kishtayya mercilessly, while most of the villagers gather around to witness such cruelty. Surya, scared for his uncontrolled atrocity, runs and hides inside his house fearing Lakshmi's wrath.

This climactic scene is carefully organised in terms of a series of shots and counter-shots. One of the key elements of this scene is the vast land that belongs to the landlord Surya, which is visible in almost all the shots. The other element is the depiction of the historical nature of relationships between landlord and landless, here the relationship between Surya as landlord and a landless Dalit couple, Laxmi and Kishtayya. The scene begins with an over-the-shoulder shot (OTS) of Surya flying a kite in his courtyard. He gazes at Kishtayya, who is approaching Surya to request work. Kishtayya is seen walking through the acres of a paddy field belonging to Surya. Shot in deep focus, a sense of graphic tension is given, configuring the vast stretch of land to be a site of historical and political struggle. The OTS and Point of View Shot (POV) of Surya cuts to a patient, calm and innocent Kishtayya making his way through the ridges of the paddy field, while the slow, stealthy and petrified, retreating Surya is shown in mid-closeup. The next shot is that of Surya giving orders to his men to grab Kishtayya, and this mid-long shot includes the visual refrain of the same green paddy field in the background. As the scuffle reaches its zenith, Surya appears with a whip (a symbol

he walks through the field.



Patient, calm and innocent Kishtayya makes his way through the ridges of the paddy field to meet the landlord Surya.

of power and feudal dominance including the right to punish the subordinated subject) and unleashes it on Kishtayya. Benegal juxtaposes the historical condition of land relations with all three vertices of the triangle—landlord, landless and land. Lakshmi is late to discover the chain of events, and as she gazes from a distance, her point of view grazes through the same paddy fields, only to reinforce the power structure of the same vertices from an opposite angle.

| | |
|--|---|
|  |  |
| <p>Petrified and guilt-ridden, Surya retreats fearing Kishtayya.</p> | <p>Kishtayya is grabbed by Surya's men while we can see the vast paddy field in the background as a visual reference.</p> |
|  |  |
| <p>Surya whipping Kishtayya out of fear.</p> | <p>Laxmi's POV across the paddy field as Surya is whipping her husband at a distance.</p> |
|  |  |
| <p>Perplexed Laxmi looking at her mute husband being whipped by the landlord.</p> | <p>Laxmi protests against Surya's atrocity as his fear culminates in an act of violence that is historical in nature.</p> |

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



A child throwing a stone at the landlord's window in protest. Such is the metaphoric seedling or "Ankur" of revolution against Surya and his class.

The denouement of the film is a scene of a series of emblematic shots, and not just in terms of the film title—*Ankur*, "the seedling" of rebellion. The title is synonymous with the action of a little boy hurling a stone to break a windowpane in the landlord's home. It offers a symbolic gesture to indicate what the marginalised and oppressed "no land's man" feels brewing within the self (as seen earlier in Lakshmi's disavowal to submit to caste prejudice and sexual exploitation by refusing to abort the child). For Prasad, this was a powerful moment that captured in minuscule the awakened consciousness of an innocent oppressed peasant (1998). [[open references and endnotes in new window](#)]

What is more important here is how the upper caste, upper-class landlord controls land in *Ankur*. It becomes the space of an historical culmination of the recent peasant uprising in Srikakulam, Naxalbari and even the peasant uprising of Telengana People's Struggle (1948-1951) that proved to be an anticipatory spirit of that which defined the Naxalbari Movement. All these added a pre-text to the film's theme (Needham 2013). Scripting the Dalit couple as "no land's (wo)men" and the protagonist owning vast lands is essential to depicting the specificity of that "other" space, with shots of the paddy field as a visual leitmotif. It may well be said that these signifying vertices of *Ankur*'s narrative transcend the film's apparently banal storyline, but I think it points to a bigger signified, one that Ranajit Guha observes—the politics of historiography in the Indian state. Plotting a stereotypical "outsider" in Benegal's films becomes an essential ploy to introduce the spectator to this "other" space (Prasad 1998 and Needham 2013). But one must also notice the politics that Benegal's films deploy in terms of gender with the male as the outsider, the female as metaphor for the landless. In *Ankur*, this outsider assumes a subject position, becomes a mediator of sort. He is aloof from the familial securities and becomes a locus of engagement with subjects from other groups and sects, thereby becoming a more "responsible and responsive national subject" (Vasudevan 2010). But this middle-class subjectivity through the protagonist Surya is soon disposed of as he turns into a replica of his own father, the absentee landlord, as he makes Lakshmi his mistress (his father had a mistress in the same village with an illegitimate son) and dispenses orders over others. In this regard, Anuradha Needham remarks,

"... these strategies are not necessarily deployed towards conservative ends alone, linked, for instance, with the bourgeoisie's attempts at selfdefinition and authorisation, but rather can be, and have been used... to represent hitherto marginalised or unknown or unknown groups, experiences, and attitudes" (2013).

Needham considers Lakshmi a metaphor of the very land that Surya owns—the land becomes an object of dominion, possession as well as exploitation—the same treatment that Surya has in store for his mistress. The regional specificity of *Ankur* and Lakshmi's unparalleled courage thus let the film implicitly refer to "significant continuities" historically in reference to the emancipatory role of the women who had participated in the fight for land rights in the Telengana People's Struggles (2013).

The Adivasi land and Nihalani's *Aakrosh*

Only a few films have been made in Hindi about the dispossessions of tribal communities. The cinematic gaze employed in commercial Hindi films in previous

Images from Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1982):



Accused Bhiku Lahaniya, a tribal rebel, in the court with his father, sister and his son in *Aakrosh* (1980).



Bhiku Lahaniya's wife, played by Smita Patil, is murdered. That's the crime for which Bhiku is accused.



Violence becomes a solution and substitute for justice when the state fails to ensure life for the marginalised. At the cremation, Bhiku kills his sister who was being eyed lustfully by the

decades was limited to stereotypes of tribal communities, as already discussed in the case of *Jhumroo* (1961). Nihalani, Shyam Benegal's cinematographer in his previous films, made a directorial debut with *Aakrosh* (1982). Realist aesthetics are a key feature of the film that demanded verisimilitude in showing the region. Set in a small town of Bhiwandi in Maharashtra, the film is based on a real incident that Vijay Tendulkar and Satyadev Dubey adopted for the script (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1995). The film then became a strong political commentary about using land as a site of economic and social exploitation of tribal inhabitants, especially since inhabitants of the region suffered at the hands of the local bureaucrats of the Indian democratic machinery. In the film, the town of Bhiwandi becomes a space of complicated social and political equations for different classes and castes; the script shows them all caught up in the deep malaise caused by the failure of the various apparatus of the state. The landscape has a heterogeneous aspect that appears to have a thematic resemblance to the characters and their violence-underneath-the-apparent-calmness of their presence. Around the town are sea, rugged mountains, an almost barren forest where the bureaucracy controls the extraction of timber, and the plains. All of these become sites of contestation and occasion the social mutilation of the tribes who live there. While talking about a much more contemporary issue in *Deccan Chronicle*, Bela Bhatia makes some remarks about the film that sums up what *Aakrosh* stands for:

“...the film conveyed the dashed hopes of the swathes of landless for the redistributed land, the undiminished power of the local ‘government’ of upper-caste landlords, politicians and local police, and the feudal and patriarchal society they command with violence and impunity while labourers toiled like oxen in their fields and despite begari—free labour—remained in their debt and subjected to unspeakable indignities as a matter of routine” (2020).

Landlessness is not the primary theme in *Aakrosh*, but it appears as a structuring element of the script. The protagonist is a tribal man named Bhiku Lahaniya, mute throughout the film, after his arrest for the alleged murder of his wife (she was raped and murdered by the forest contractor, local police and the aide of the local minister). The protagonist is characterised by an uncanny silence, causing a discomfort for viewers, especially since it is a constant expression of repressed anger. A young upper-caste lawyer Bhaskar is the other innocent character and was recruited by the government to defend the convict. Bhaskar discovers the truth through his experience and investigation, largely helped by a Naxalite. While the case sways a little toward the defendant through Bhaskar’s constant interrogation, during the trial Bhiku Lahaniya loses his father. Then, while at the cremation, Bhiku grabs an axe and deals a heavy blow to his sister who was being eyed lustfully by the perpetrators. That is because his sister otherwise would have definitely suffered the same fate as his late wife. The “aakrosh,” or the agony of Bhiku's climactic scream rents the air with deafening magnitude, piercing the doldrums of state development. The film does not end here, rather has a dialogue sequence between two lawyers, discussing the very validity of such a democratic system that fails to deliver justice to the weak.

Aakrosh is primarily concerned with the exploitation of the tribal community by the hands of a post-colonial system that the state has stuck with. One of the crudest instances of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003), Bhiku Lahaniya becomes the face of the revolutionary subject; his revolt presupposes a movement against agents of the state whose resource accumulation has resulted in the misery of the already marginalized. This holds true for the NCM’s themes in the 1980s. This more vibrant and politically committed cinema from art-house filmmakers revealed a new order of reflexivity about their own social position within the Indian polity and culture. To create a character like Bhiku Lahaniya and

perpetrators.



The benefits of taking over a national asset (the forest) is exposed through a scene in *Aakrosh* (1984). A forest contractor gathers timber for sale from the forest by employing local tribes as daily wagers.



The Public Prosecutor played by Amrish Puri (left) and the local Forest Contractor are part of the group or the nexus which Bhatia describes as the local "government". Here they are inside their club discussing Maoist activities in the region.

show his subjugation by the bureaucracy and government officials under India's democratic system of India means showing the result of that growth in the economy since the 1980s that had put a demand for land and other natural resources. *Aakrosh's* story becomes an intertwined tale of two dominant themes—first, land as a space of power structure and second, land as a sight of violence—both political and sexual. Tribal identities like that of Bhiku Lahanya did not gain much from the Indian independence in terms of "freedom" in its truest sense. This fact, which Nihalani refers to in *Aakrosh*, is evident from the National Forest Policy of 1952 that permits the tribal neighbourhoods to use woodland resources but not at the cost of national interests.

Although the term "Adivasi" implies the original inhabitants of the land, it became an acceptable and legal norm in the state machinery that said that the state has the rights to evict Adivasis. The legitimacy of the state, its right to "receive the benefits of a national asset," enters the film script in the scene of the forest contractor in *Aakrosh*. He's gathering timber in the forest, employing the members of the local tribes as daily wagers, thereby turning a community of collectors and gatherers into wage earners. Furthermore, a sense of psychological violence is not limited to the treatment of the tribal members, but it is disseminated through the spatial representation of the organised town, shaping it into a microcosmic schism of the state itself. There's the space of bureaucratic operatives of colonial capacities—the court of law, the prison, the club for the elite bureaucrats, the "private property" of the judge (where trespassing is strictly prohibited), the office of the District Council, the telephone exchange. On the other hand, there are the free press, the forest and the tribal village. Violence is communicated in the film through representation of an apparently serene and peaceful town infested by the above operative units of the state. In that way, the town itself becomes a metaphor of the "system" of the democratic process that operates on the principles of accumulation by dispossession.



From the left in the first row: the court of law, the prison, the club for the elites.
From the left in the second row: the free press, the forest where timber is extracted from, the village.

Bhiwandi, the town where the narrative is set, is seen as a microcosmic division of the Indian state.

Bhaskar is the outsider character. Through such a character, a subject position is created with a deep investment in the values of the educated middle-class who gains access to the "other" land. It is a character viewers can identify with. Bhaskar becomes the embodiment of the self-reflexivity of the middle-class within the political milieu of the state (Sarkar 2009), but is a character who fails to render any assistance to those caught in this bureaucratic landscape, the very nature of which is to exploit "land" and further marginalise its inhabitants.



One of the many images of violence where a Left-activist is abducted from the tribal village.



Another instance of violence as Bhiku desperately tries to save his wife from being gang raped by the bureaucrats inside the town club.



Violence is a message under the apparent calmness of the town. Here Bhaskar is injured after being attacked by a goon for his investigation into Bhiku Lahaniya's case.



Bhaskar, the embodiment of the self-reflexivity of the middle-class in the political milieu of India, is trying to save Bhiku from the false charges of homicide.

The underlying tension of caste and its relation to land ownership in *Aakrosh* reveals the hollowness inside the very machinery of the law the Indian state operates with. As Ranajit Guha (2010) aptly puts it, the characterization of a hierarchy among Indian subjects based on caste has been a means of justifying the conquest of the lands belonging to the inferior castes (like Bhiku Lahanya and other members of his tribe). And these were the same justifications on which the colonial laws of land acquisition were often based. The state's despotic gaze on Bhiku Lahanya and members of his kind (the tribes) can be summed up by what Arundhati Roy had to say in her first non-fiction work, *The Cost of Living*:

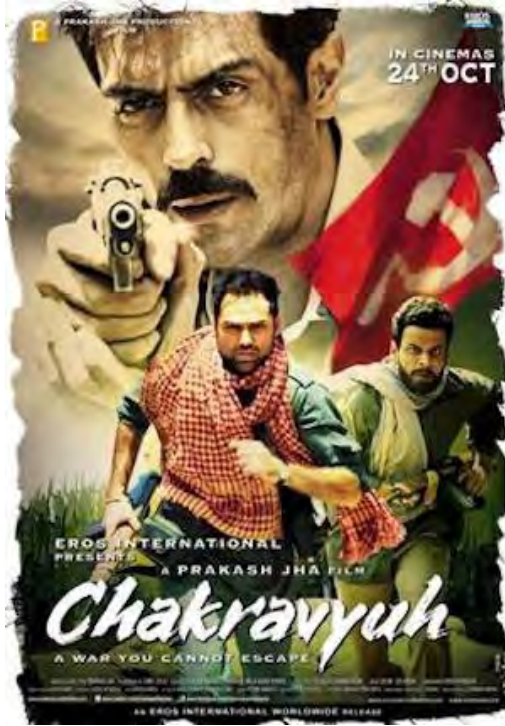
“the ethnic ‘otherness’ of their [state’s] victims [the tribal people] takes some of the pressure off the nation-builders. It’s like having an expense account. Someone else pays the bills” (1999).



Conclusion

A new cinematic historiography can be charted while tracing the depiction of “no land’s men” from fifties to the New Cinema Movement. Although the Subaltern Studies project began in India in 1982, almost thirteen years after NCM, and there is hardly any connection between the two, the new historians’ attempts at locating the “politics of the people” in configuring Indian history has its resonance in film history. It can be traced in the approach of the Indian New Wave trying to restore consciousness and agency to neglected historical agents. From Shambhu Mahato of *Do Bigha Zameen* to Laxmi in *Ankur* and Bhiku Lahanya of *Aakrosh*, Hindi

A scene from Anusha Rizvi's *Peepli Live* (2010).



A poster of Prakash Jha's *Chakravyuh* (2012).



A still from the harvesting scene in Vishal Bharadwaj's *Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola* (2013).

cinema has addressed no land's men and women in different decades, trying to point out a kind of black hole of Indian independence in terms of dealing with land relations. But unlike Shambhu of *Do Bigha Zameen*, in *Ankur* and *Aakrosh* the category of "no land's man" has ceased from being "pre-political," implying a lack of political coherence that would disenfranchise people from identifying the forces of their exploitation (Hobsbawm 1959), to the disenfranchised being the "subject conscious of his own history" (Guha 1983). In *Do Bigha Zameen*, Shambhu and his family look on in utter hopelessness at the construction of the mill on their usurped land, the beginning of industrialisation in post-independence India. As Shambhu takes a little bit of soil from the construction site, he seems to have accepted his fate as within a newly disenfranchised community. On being accused as "thieves" by the security guard, the Mahatos simply leave the scene. There is no retaliation, no assertion.

While in the filmic narratives of the "no land's men" of the fifties, social conflict (narratives of exploitation and dissent) is quite understandably missing, there is a renewed sense of community consciousness in films under NCM. Lakshmi is aware of the rigid caste-class-gender exploitation prevalent in villages (evident from a scene in the film where she looks angrily at the village headman for forcing a woman to stay on in marriage with her abusive husband). Yet, she chooses to keep her illegitimate child, lose work, and take in her stride the humiliation that the entire village will subject her community to. With land rights but no land, Bhiku Lahanya refuses with stunned steeliness to be legally framed for a crime he has not committed. His dissent continues even when he has to kill his own sister in defense.

The political films of NCM did not align themselves ideologically with the state. As the neo-liberal economy unleashed its iron-claws on the Indian market with the economic liberalisation of 1991, NCM began to lose its institutional as well as financial back up before it finally lost its relevance. With the dissolution of state patronage towards NCM, political cinema per se ceased to exist in India. However, there has been a recent upsurge of a political tendency in certain cinemas of India (Tamil, Malayalam and a few Hindi ones too) that have begun to question the neo-liberal project. Anusha Rizvi's *Peepli Live* (2010), Prakash Jha's *Chakravyuh* (2012), Vishal Bharadwaj's *Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola* (2013) are some of the popular Hindi films that have attempted a kind of a political subject addressing land as the biggest crisis of contemporary India even after more than half a century of Indian independence.

The theoretical framework of this essay has been to point out to the historical and yet unresolved social, political and cultural issues related to land and Hindi Cinema's response to it.

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Notes

1. Reserve Army of Labour is a concept first used by Friederich Engels in his *The Condition of the Working Class* published in 1845. Marx used the term in *Critique of Political Economy* to delineate the condition of the misery of the working class, as there is always an army of excess labour to acquire from to continue an unhindered condition of production. The reserve army is created due to unemployment or underemployment in a capitalist society. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. Kashmir and Darjeeling are two regions of India which are not only disputed in terms of their inclusion in India after the Indian independence in 1947, but are controversial as geo-political entities as well. Kashmir was a Princely state with a majority of Muslim population and a Hindu king named Hari Singh. But after the Indian independence, Hari Singh neither joined the newly formed nation of Pakistan, nor the Hindu majoritarian India. Kashmir went into a standstill agreement with Pakistan, which was broken by Pakistani rebels since Kashmir population were mostly Muslim. When Hari Singh sought help from India, India made Hari Singh sign the Instrument of Accession, and later was given special status within the Indian constitution with independence in everything except defense, communications and foreign affair. Hindi cinema's territorial nationalism puts Kashmir as a region integral to India, overshadowing the historical fact that Kashmir under Hari Singh had dreamt for a "Free Kashmir." Darjeeling, a district in West Bengal had been seeking separation from Bengal since 1907 for their cultural and ethnic difference with the people of the state. Forcefully brought to the hilly-town of Darjeeling by the British and their Indian agents as tea-plantation labourers from Nepal and Bhutan, the majority of the population in Darjeeling was treated as second grade citizens exploiting them to the fullest. Owing to a shameful history of the colonial exploitation of the Nepalese of Darjeeling, the movement for a separate state is still going on. The agenda of national integration and territorial unity became a cultural concern for Bombay films as well. This has led a number of films to set its narrative in the hill-station of Darjeeling, of course with narratives that represents Darjeeling as a part of the greater whole called India without paying any attention to the ethnic and people's history of the region.

3. Naxalbari Movement is an armed peasant movement spearheaded by a group of radical communists in the year 1967 in the village called Naxalbari (and hence the name) in Siliguri sub-division in West Bengal, India. Naxalbari uprising was a culmination against the landlords and the bureaucratic structure of the Indian Government that tried to change the political and economic structure of the state that hardly underwent any change since the British Raj. A number of scholars, intellectuals, and students from erudite institutions from Kolkata and rest of India joined what they called the people's war. Soon it spread to wide parts of India including Bihar, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and other parts. For more, read Sumanta Banerjee's seminal work *In the Wake of Naxalbari: A History of the Naxalite Movement in India*. [[return to page 2](#)]

4. 1968 is one of the most remarkable years of the twentieth century in the entire

world and especially in the United States. The year was marked by the escalation of the Vietnam War and assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. But more than these two events along with the US aerospace achievement of Apollo 13, the year is remembered for revolutionary humanism that delivered a seismic social and political change. From anti-Vietnam War protests to civil rights movements, famine in Africa and to students' protests across the globe, the way we looked at the political and social structures of the world changed. These political and social movements on a global scale had an unprecedented overwhelming effect on music, literature, theatre and cinema.

5. The Malabar rebellion, also called Mappila revolt, was a remarkable event that saw people in southern Malabar, predominantly Muslims, wage an armed struggle against the British for nearly six months beginning August 1921. Three different political movements merged to trigger the rebellion — one of these, the tenancy movement, was rooted in local agrarian grievances (particularly in south Malabar); the other two were the Khilafat (Caliphate) movement and the Non-Cooperation movement, launched jointly by the All-India Khilafat Committee and the [Indian National Congress](#).

6. The Bardoli Satyagraha in Surat, Gujarat, was a peasants' movement against the British government's decision to raise land revenue led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. It was the child of the non-cooperation movement started by Gandhi. This movement earned Patel the title "Sardar."

7. Tebhaga Movement of 1946-1950 was started by the share-croppers who fought for two-thirds of the produce from the land against the rich peasants called the *Jotdars*.

8. *Sangh Parivar* is an umbrella term for the ultra Hindu nationalists, the institutional face of the right wing volunteers. This *parivar* (which means family) describes the matrix of the family or the community of the ultra Hindu nationalists of RashtriyaSeyamsevakSangh or known by its acronym as RSS. The present right wing government of India, Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP, is an apparent democratic extension of the SanghParivar participating in the electoral process after RSS was banned for the first few years following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. BJP, being a part of the larger ideology of SanghParivar with the super objective of creating a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu State), is instrumental in projecting a religious nationalism with a significant control almost over all the media houses in India and major industries.

9. Social Justice reformer from Maharashtra, Jyotiba Phule, who has provided the first systematic theory of caste is said to have coined the term "Dalit" in the 19th Century. Initially it was used in public discourse to mean "brokenness" and talk about "broken" people oppressed by the Hindu varna system. The term and its usage gained popularity in 1970s in Maharashtra with the emergence of the Dalit Panthers. The term "Dalit" in their manifesto came to mean "all those who are exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion". The Dalit Panthers heralded a new approach in Dalit politics in post-independence India by advocating for radical politics outside the framework of both parliamentary and Marxist-Leninist politics, fusing Ambedkar, Phule and Marx.

10. Having its roots in the Telengana Rebellion of 1946, Srikakulam Peasant Uprising took place in Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh in the month of October of 1967. Inspired from the Naxalbari uprising, this uprising was triggered by the murder of two villagers by the local landlords. In retaliation, almost the entire tribal community took up arms, looted the landlords of their land and produce. The next year saw a more organised armed uprising that hurled its guerrilla attack on the state.

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List of films

Aakrosh. Directed by Govind Nihalani. 1980.

Ankur. Directed by Shyam Benegal. 1974.

Chakravyuh. Directed by Prakash Jha. 2012.

Dharti Ke Laal. Directed by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas. 1946.

Dil Deke Dekho. Directed by Nasir Hussain. 1959.

Do Bigha Zameen. Directed by Bimal Roy. 1953.

Hariyali Aur Rasta. Directed by Vijay Bhatt. 1962.

Humraaz. Directed by B.R.Chopra. 1967

Jhumroo. Directed by Shankar Mukherjee. 1961

Kashmir Ki Kali. Directed by ShaktiSamanta. 1964

Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola. Directed by Vishal Bharadwaj. 2013.

Mother India. Directed by Mehboob. 1957

Nishant. Directed by ShyamBenegal. 1975.

Peepli Live. Directed by Anusha Rizvi. 2010.

Professor. Directed by Lekh Tandon. 1962.

Tumsa Nahi Dekha. Directed by Nasir Hussai. 1959.



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Critics joke that time ran out on the disaster film when *When Time Ran Out* appeared.



The luxury hotel ensures a private death because it marks a rejection of the public in *When Time Ran Out*.



Bob is the exemplary capitalist subject because he puts the accumulation of capital ahead of all other concerns in *When Time Ran Out*.

Catastrophic politics: the disaster film and respite from privacy

by [Todd McGowan](#)

Capitalism's peak

In the disaster film, the capitalist is always wrong. As a disaster looms for a region or for the world, those always looking for profit inevitably fail to see how the disaster's destructiveness will neutralize possibilities for advancing the interests of capital. At the same time, while disasters impair the accumulation of capital, they also highlight a fundamental equality that capitalist relations obscure. Everyone is equal in the face of the disaster. Rather than enhancing people's chances of survival, a capitalist mindset has a deleterious effect on their odds of making it, especially in the disaster film. [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Nowhere is this clearer than in *When Time Ran Out* (James Goldstone, 1980).

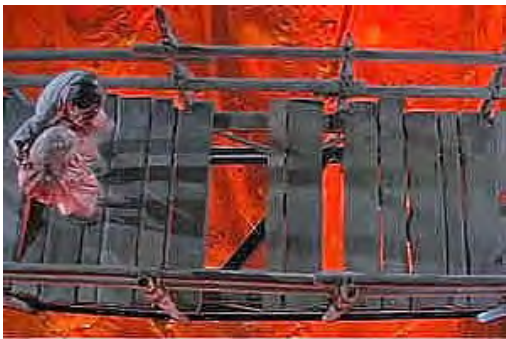
When critics attempt to discern the worst disaster film ever made, *When Time Ran Out* often comes out on top (or on bottom, depending on how one looks at it). [2] It is almost universally credited with bringing an end to the first cycle of disaster films in the 1970s that began with *Airport* (George Seaton, 1970), due to its abject failure at the box office. But the critical and popular failure of *When Time Ran Out* does not result from its breaking from the generic tropes of the disaster film. This film follows these tropes too rigidly. However, for showing how the genre functions, this rigidity also makes it exemplary for my purposes here.

When Time Ran Out takes place on an island resort, where a volcano looms in the background of a luxury hotel. The film's hero, Hank Anderson (Paul Newman), is an oil driller who strikes oil at the beginning of the film. His partner, Bob Spangler (James Franciscus), plans to use the money from the discovery to free himself from his wealthy patron, Shelby Gilmore (William Holden), and his spouse Nikki (Veronica Hamel), who is Shelby's goddaughter. The film's central conflict occurs between Hank and Bob: Hank wants to stop the drilling because of the volcano's danger while Bob wants to go forward because of the well's potential profit.

Dramatically, this conflict is enacted in the contrasting performance styles of Newman and Franciscus. Newman plays Hank with subdued restraint even in the midst of great success, while Franciscus' character Bob bubbles over with enthusiasm at the prospect of becoming wealthy. No matter what the situation, Franciscus acts as if Bob can barely contain himself. Bob's eagerness to accumulate constantly makes itself visible, while Hank's concern is for the safety of his fellow workers. Later, the two characters split over how to respond to the volcano's eruption. Hank leads a group from the hotel across the island to safety,



The group that leaves finds equality in the difficulties in *When Time Ran Out*. The film shows how the perilous journey forms them as a public.



The disaster mediates the formation of a public in all forms of the disaster film.

while Bob encourages the majority of guests to remain in the hotel, a decision that ends up killing all of them. The hotel's opulence contrasts with the rough terrain that the group must traverse, but opulence leads only to death.

As the disaster film reveals, a natural disaster politicizes the economy, transforming individuals dedicated to their private goals into political subjects engaged in the public world. Those who respond to the disaster by remaining in their private realms and resisting their public responsibility end up dying. In this case, fireballs from the volcano destroy the hotel and all those remaining in its luxury. The group that Hank constitutes survives through the mutual aid that they provide for each other. In this way, the survival plot acquires a political bearing. The film shows that by deciding to act collectively, this group poses a fundamental challenge to the logic of capital, a challenge that becomes clear only when disaster strikes. The disaster film reveals that we can approach natural disaster as a political event through paying attention to how the very situation foregrounds people's universal equality in the face of catastrophe.

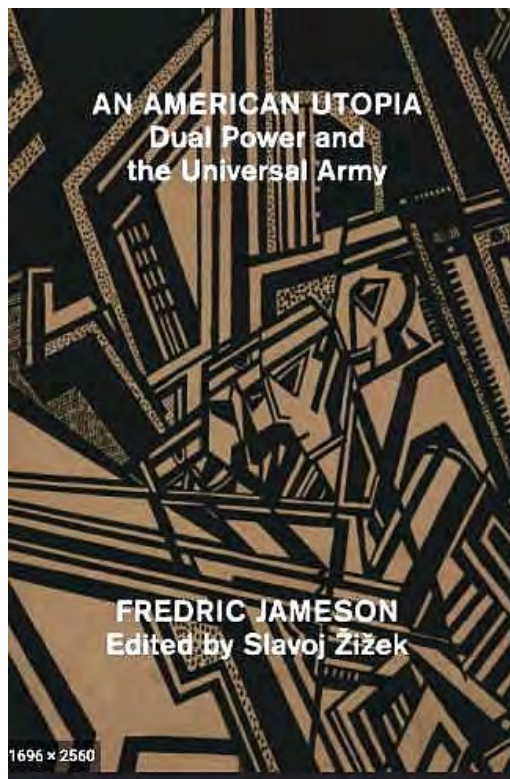
In the climactic scene of *When Time Ran Out*, characters traverse a decaying and burning bridge that goes over a stream of flowing lava. Although some members of the group die during the crossing, everyone works together to navigate the passage. As the characters aid each other in crossing the bridge, the film cuts to shots from above in order to highlight the flowing lava in the background. Visually, it becomes apparent that disaster mediates the formation of a group that acts cooperatively. The background of flowing lava is not just a danger that the group must surmount. It is the force that reveals the group as a public collective rather than as a mere collection of private individuals.[3] The natural disaster politicizes privacy in the logic of the disaster film.

The disaster film—and the disaster itself—initially appears as an apolitical event. But there is a hidden political charge to a disaster that these films almost always accentuate. In the face of the disaster, it becomes evident that to insist on one's private interests leads to death and that survival depends on committing oneself to others, to the public world. The disaster film and natural disasters themselves reveal, when we interpret them correctly, a way past the depredations of our capitalist epoch.

The appeal of private life

Theorists on the Left often lament today that it is easier to imagine the world's end than that of capitalism. While Hollywood has no problem creating spectacular and often credible fantasies of the world's destruction in disaster films, not even leftist theorists can envision a workable path out of capitalism or a way to counter popular attachment to it.[4] The contrast between our capacity for imagining the end of the world and our inability to imagine the end of capitalism reveals not just the extent of capitalism's psychic dominance but also the dismantling of the public sphere in favor of a retreat into privacy. Capitalism doesn't just install itself as the only game in town. It also militates against the formation of a public sphere that expresses a collective bond, which would form the basis for contesting capitalist relations of production.

Universal values like equality or solidarity no longer attract our belief or compel our action. Instead, we become preoccupied with safeguarding our private lives. Private life serves ironically as the most commonly shared and recognized value. Prevalence of fantasies about the world's end testifies to the prevalence of this value, which in fact evacuates value. That is, the consequence of private life becoming the only value is that existence loses the values that give it worth and inspire struggle.



Fredric Jameson is one of the few to imagine the end of capitalism today. He sees the formation of mandatory military service as a way out of our isolated privacy.



Pierre Bourdieu recognizes how politics is evacuated from events. Every major political event appears as if it were a natural disaster.

Political fights depend on people's capacity to invest themselves in the public world, which is why the ubiquity of prioritizing private life has such devastating political consequences. Rather than struggling for values that might lead us to oppose capitalism, we struggle to secure our private world from violent intrusion, which ensures the dominance of capitalist relations of production. The struggle for equality has lost ground to the struggle to better my private world, which is the struggle of a depoliticized subject, a subject losing the capacity to experience the world in political terms. As we turn to privacy, our mode of living dramatically transforms how we experience and interpret contemporary events.

For example, consider the rhetoric around "crisis." In the privatized world of contemporary capitalism, there are fewer political catastrophes; instead, there are humanitarian crises.[5] Great problems seem to concern a threat to private lives more than reveal the structure of a political situation. For example, the response to the Serbian or the Rwandan genocide was not to take up a political position and become engaged but to provide humanitarian relief. As a result, political catastrophes often appear described in the form of natural disaster. Pierre Bourdieu describes this process of transformation in his analysis of journalism in *On Television*. He notes that the news presents political events around the world as if they occur outside of politics. As he puts it,

"Stripped of any political necessity, this string of events can at best arouse a vague humanitarian interest. Coming one after the other and outside any historical perspective, these unconnected tragedies seem to differ little from natural disasters—the tornadoes, forest fires, and floods that also occupy so much of the news.... As for the victims, they're not presented in any more political a light than those of a train derailment or any other accident." [6]

Understanding the structure behind this kind of rhetoric means understanding that it's not just bad news reporting that describes events as natural disasters when, in fact, political events are taking place. Such blindness to politics and a consequent monocular focus on the humanitarian dimension of every catastrophe are first and foremost ideological effects of our capitalist universe.

At the same time, although today we tend to interpret political events as natural disasters, the natural disaster itself has a latent political content. Thus, we should turn the tables and learn to interpret natural disaster as incipient political events. Disasters make political universality readily evident. We quickly see that everyone



The universality of shared absence emerges in *San Andreas* when the earthquake disrupts everyday capitalist existence.



Airport commences the genre of the disaster film in 1970.



Unstoppable shows that the disaster film is alive and well in the 2000s and beyond.

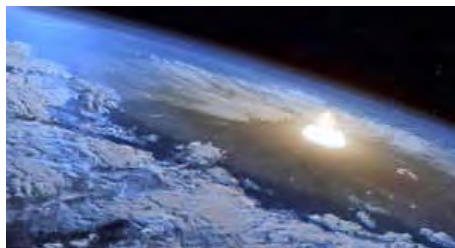
is equal in the face of disaster, that it can strike the rich as ruthlessly as it does the poor. In the midst of the loss that all suffer, we share this loss. The universal nature of our status as lacking subjects becomes apparent. We can recognize in the natural disaster the universality of a shared loss that binds everyone together. This doesn't just appear in actual catastrophes but also appears in imaginative works about disaster. In the case I am looking at here, disaster films, the dramatic discovery of a universality in the face of shared loss is the feature that characterizes the genre, a genre that can instruct us on how to interpret the disasters that befall us in our reality.

A disastrous epoch

Genre is not eternal. Genres arises in response to social antagonisms that they express and often attempt to solve aesthetically. This is why the western can disappear and the disaster film can emerge in its wake. The disaster film arose as a genre only at an historical moment when the public sphere disappeared and capitalism succeeded in locking people into their private worlds. The 1970s marked a worldwide retreat into privacy, a retreat from the political engagement that characterized the 1960s.[7] This retreat coincided with the rise of the disaster film, which attempted to engage this political moment aesthetically as it responded to a world in which securing one's private existence had become a primary value.

Though films depicting disasters existed prior to the 1970s, the disaster film as such did not emerge until this time, the onset of the epoch of privacy. George Seaton's *Airport* (1970) was the first disaster film. Following *Airport*, the 1970s witnessed a spate of various filmic disasters—*Earthquake* (Mark Robson, 1974), *Avalanche* (Corey Allen, 1978), *Meteor* (Ronald Neame, 1979), and so on—that culminated with the total failure of *When Time Ran Out*. Although the disaster film lay dormant through most of the 1980s (perhaps because of the failure of *When Time Ran Out*), it reappeared in the 1990s and continues to thrive today with films such as *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009), *San Andreas* (Brad Peyton, 2015), and *Geostorm* (Dean Devlin, 2017).

Because a disaster or catastrophe stands as an ultimate threat to private life and human survival, the disaster film necessarily plays a central role in the contemporary landscape of cultural fantasies. It engages spectators with the threat of wiping out their private lives. The genre depicts a struggle to survive. But where contemporary journalism translates political catastrophes into terms of natural disasters, the disaster film treats the natural disaster as a political opportunity and that's the key to its value for us as spectators.



The destruction unleashed by the disaster is a political opportunity.



The public world trumps privacy in the disaster film like *The Day After Tomorrow*.

| | |
|--|--|
| | |
| | It is significant that the group that survives in New York City does so in a public library. |

In the face of the danger to private life that the disaster represents, we paradoxically see in these films a concern for the public reemerge and replace mere survival as motivation. Though the disaster film may provide spectacular images of the end of the world or other destruction, the narrative trajectory and tropes of the disaster film articulate a pointedly political rejection of private life's evisceration of value. In his analysis of the disaster genre, Stephen Keane suggests that "disaster movies are innately passive and survivalist (in the sense that when their central disasters occur the characters have no choice but to try and make their way up, down or out into safety)." [8] But this interpretation fails to account for the number of characters in disaster films who put their survival—their private lives—at risk for others. The disaster film envisions a politicization that would counter the monopoly that private life itself has on our actions. In this sense, the disaster genre, despite the millions required to produce these spectacles, calls into question the ideology of privacy that underlies the capitalist universe.

Disaster capitalism

The politics of capitalism is depoliticization. Though it relies on the creation and appropriation of surplus value, capitalism destroys the values necessary for political subjectivity and struggle. This is what Marx and Engels recount in *The Communist Manifesto* when they proclaim,

"The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, ... has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'" [9]

Under capitalism, measured cynicism manipulates a hypocritical politics. [10] Even though political revolutions have helped to facilitate the development of capitalist relations of production, the genuine political revolution is always at odds with the structure of capitalism, even if that revolution contributes to the rise of capitalist relations. In this sense, the Thermidorian Reaction that ends the engaged political climate of the French Revolution has more to do with capitalist relations of production in France than does the Jacobin Terror that inaugurates it. [11]

Politics are anathema to the structure of capitalism because political struggle interrupts the accumulation of capital. When engaging in political activity, I momentarily cease producing and consuming commodities. I advance values that cannot be reduced to the value of a commodity. The field of political struggle is an alternative terrain to that of the capitalist economy. It is a terrain that inherently connects us with others, which is what the logic of capital tries to impede.



Political values always challenge the smooth operations of capital.



Marx and Engels suggest capitalism's destruction of politics in *The Communist Manifesto*. They call for a political response to capitalism.



Political activism interrupts accumulation, even if this activism is not explicitly anti-capitalist.



The capitalist subject is always an isolated monad because it takes its own concerns as the starting point for all considerations.



Hannah Arendt criticizes the turn to privacy for its deleterious effect on the formation of a public world.

In order to function as a capitalist subject, one must view oneself as an isolated monad. Only in this way can one constantly maximize one's accumulation of capital. A connection with others—a recognition of universality—lifts the subject out of its private world and interferes with a person's ability to profit from others. Once this occurs, capitalist society loses its hold on the subject's psyche, as other values challenge the accumulation of capital for supremacy in one's imagination and way of thinking.[12]

Even though capitalism is constantly revolutionizing the conditions of production, it has a profound allergy for political revolution. The struggle for liberty, equality, and solidarity has nothing to do with capitalism's political goals and values, despite the apparent connection that these values have with the onset of capitalism. Political liberty is not economic liberty; the equality of disparate citizens is not the equality of capitalist subjects in the market place; and the solidarity of engaged subjects is not the bond felt by consumers enthralled by the sublimity of the commodity. Under capitalism as we experience it today, political values always become economic ones: freedom ceases to be the freedom to intervene politically in the direction that the society might take and becomes instead living with unlimited consumption, the absence of a social safety net, and a lack of responsibility for ecological damage.[13] Capitalism's transformation of political values into economic ones produces a world in which private life—and the self-interest necessary to defend private life—is the only persistent value.

For the purely economic individual, existence is essentially private. The privatization of parts of the public world—roads, prisons, schools, and so on—assists in the eradication of our political being. By contrasting capitalism's apotheosis of privacy with the attitude of the ancient Greeks, Hannah Arendt makes evident the turn away from politics. She says,

"A man who lived only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm, or like the barbarian had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human. We no longer think primarily of deprivation when we use the word 'privacy,' and this is partly due to the enormous enrichment of the private sphere through modern individualism." [14]

The problem with this retreat into privacy, as Arendt sees it, is not just its

deleterious effect on the public world but its destruction of our political being. Private life concerns itself only with its own reproduction. When it becomes our exclusive domain, it leaves us disengaged from the world.

In its ultimate form, *capitalist ideology* does not emphasize the importance of the individual subject, the values of the free market, or the evils of collective action. Instead, it passes itself off as the absence of ideology, proclaiming that everyone simply follows self-interest in order to best survive and that all other values represent an ideological mystification. This is why Neo-Darwinist explanations have achieved the status of common sense today. Darwinian individuals pursue their self-interest and that of the species without regard for the epiphenomenon of ideology. From this perspective, survival and propagation become the only valid explanatory principles because they speak to fundamental “natural facts” rather than their ideological structures.[15] The old ideological justifications—sacrifice for the family or the nation, loyalty to the company—are no longer necessary. The apparent absence of all ideology installs itself as the most effective capitalist ideology.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Today's capitalism no longer requires subjects devoted to the work ethic or to seeking status like the organization man of the 1950s. As long as they choose life style over politics, contemporary subjects play out their role within the capitalist system. This choice manifests itself, for example, in the exaggerated attention paid to perfecting the body or in the ubiquity of security measures. In these instances, while ensuring security or staying healthy sound like non-ideological projects, they help to construct a subjectivity for whom capitalist relations seem natural and politics appears as anathema. Private life is the most refined—and yet the simplest—form of capitalist ideology. It is all the more effective because life appears natural.

Within the ideology of private life, political questions get transformed into technical questions, and the expert replaces the politician. In terms of the larger dynamic here, politics disappears and transforms itself into life not simply as a result of particular decisions made by groups and individuals at a particular historical moment. Rather, the disappearance of politics is rooted in a radical transformation of the structure of the social field that occurs throughout the historical trajectory of capitalist society.[16] [\[open endotes in new window\]](#) As capitalism develops, it produces an increasing evisceration of the public world for the sake of ensuring the primacy of private ones. One would expect that private life would emerge as the main value primarily at those historical moments when life is most precarious—times of war, famine, and great scarcity in general. This is not the case. A threat to life often has the effect of facilitating the assertion of other values challenging prioritizing private life. Currently, the ideology of private life has arisen among those who live in relative security and stability more than among those whose lives are most clearly at risk.



Public roads become the site for private privileges.



The gated community is one clear indication of the retreat into privacy away from the public world.

A public world—a world of politics—arises through the recognition of shared limits, limits that restrict private concerns from overwhelming the public. For example, one clear form of a limit that allows the political field to function is the limit on private money given to politicians. If this limit ceases to exist at all—if one could simply bribe political leaders with impunity—the public world of political contestation would disappear. Private interest would completely subsume the public world. The limit that protects the public world from being overrun by private interest is constitutive for the public world. But this limit is what capitalism inherently eats away at.

Capitalism reproduces itself by constantly going beyond all limits: limits of any sort are anathema to capitalism, which is why it eventually threatens public space altogether. As capitalist society develops, limits on private life become increasingly untenable, and the public world disintegrates. From gated communities and express toll lanes to private prisons and deregulation, the limits that define the public world become increasingly under attack by the forces of capital. Finally, the very existence of public entities, as for example, public transportation and utilities, constitutes an unacceptable limit on capitalist growth.

The elimination of every limit is the fundamental operation of capitalist society. To return to the terms of *The Communist Manifesto*, in this society “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.”[17] The process of commodification profanes every space by treating it as a site for the accumulation of capital. There is no object so sacred that the capitalist system will not treat as



Even my most intimate feelings have a price in the capitalist universe.

just another commodity to be bought and sold. Nothing is off-limits for the process of commodification. As a television show like *Who Wants To Marry a Millionaire?* attests, people can treat their most intimate feelings as available for the right price. This system of total commodification is correlative to the emergence of private life as the fundamental value.

Without a clear sense of the public world, there is no way to recognize what holds everyone together. Unchecked focus on the private sphere eliminates our ability to see universality. Universality disappears when everyone remains ensconced in a private world disconnected from the public, which is the terrain of the universal. Today, many people are unable to conceive of themselves as belonging to a shared political world.

Universal Studios

The disaster film intervenes in a capitalist society where the public world has disappeared. As a genre, its response is an attempt to reassert the fundamental priority of the public relative to our private lives. The disaster film provides a riposte to the apotheosis of privacy. When we first look at them, disaster films such as *Airport*, *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972), and *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin and Irwin Allen, 1974) seem like uncritical responses to the world in which private life is the only value. They titillate audiences with the threat to private life and then show the survival of some characters—and thus seem to save private life as a fundamental value. The goal that spectators identify in these films is mere survival in the face of an overwhelming existential threat. But the disaster film as a genre actually represents a return to politics out of daily private life, an attempt to reassert the necessity of a political terrain. Though they have their basis in private life's evacuation of politics, they reassert politics by affirming the valuelessness of bare life. Private life depends on—or so the disaster film proclaims—a basis in the public.[18]



The disaster film as such begins in the 1970s and continues after a brief hiatus during the 1980s.

The key to the reassertion of the value of the public sphere in the disaster film stems from the psychic effect of the disaster itself. The disaster reintroduces a fundamental limit into the existence of everyone that it touches. Private life ceases to function. Its dependence on the public world becomes evident in the face of the disaster, and this collective dependence is what the disaster film highlights. Within the disaster film, the disaster does not simply pose a threat to the lives of characters. Much more importantly, it reveals to them (and to the spectator) the inadequacy of privacy.



Universality emerges through a shared lack. We don't share a positive trait in common but share what we don't have.

The disaster disrupts the daily lives of the characters in the disaster film and makes it impossible for them to continue to act in the same way as before. The disaster, in other words, rips characters out of their private existence. In order to register this disruption, every disaster film begins with a variety of characters engaged in their quotidian behavior. Private concerns predominate the openings of these films. We see, for instance, the marital troubles of Stewart Graff (Charlton Heston) and Remy Royce-Graff (Ava Gardner) in *Earthquake*, the interaction of Mayor Rachel Wando (Linda Hamilton) with her children in *Dante's Peak* (Roger Donaldson, 1997), or the class trip of Sam Hall (Jake Gyllenhaal) in *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004). Each film depicts individuals or small groups of characters acting in isolation, consumed by private concerns and oblivious to the incipient public danger. The films direct the spectator's focus to privacy as well. In each case, the focus on private activity serves only as a prelude to its coming insignificance. In the midst of the disaster, subjects must turn their concern to the public world and life in common.

By turning characters' attention to the common, the disaster effects a politicization through the force of negation. One cannot simply remain within one's private world and turn a blind eye to the public. To do so means, according to the political morality of the disaster film, sure death. The disaster film transforms a world that seems reduced to bare survivability to one in which the public reemerges.

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| Survival requires commitment to the public world in disaster films like <i>Dante's Peak</i> . Those who remain in their private worlds perish. | Disasters like the end of the world in <i>2012</i> reintroduce negativity. |

The ideology of private life has the effect of separating subjects from each other and creating the sense that everyone is an isolated monad in the world. The disaster film often begins by showing individuals in their isolation, unconcerned with the common. But the occurrence of the disaster has the effect of bringing these isolated lives into connection. The private concerns that populate the opening minutes of the disaster film—uncertainties about one's career as a motorcycle stuntman, fears about turmoil in a relationship, and so on—soon fade into insignificance. It is the threat to life that allows the preoccupation with the private world, a characteristic of the capitalist ideology of privacy, to recede. In a certain way, disaster films demand a kind of politicization of the spectator. The proper response to the disaster film is not a retreat into a survivalist mentality because of danger but instead to open oneself to a public subjectivity and an embrace of the idea of the common.



Disaster prompts sacrifice in *Airport*. We see characters come together through their various sacrifices.

The constitution of a new public world is evident even in *Airport*, the first of the disaster films and one of the least overtly political. Though the scale of the disaster in *Airport* is small in comparison with what would follow (such as the destruction of the world in *Armageddon* [Michael Bay, 1998] and *2012*, for instance), the film nonetheless depicts the passengers on the damaged plane and the airport employees on the ground reorienting themselves around the public world. Ground crew chief Joe Patroni (George Kennedy) leaves his spouse at home, despite his plans for a special evening alone with her, in order to clear a plane from the runway. Mel Bakersfeld (Burt Lancaster) refuses his spouse's demand that he come to their dinner engagement in order that he can manage the emergency. And Captain Vernon Demerest (Dean Martin) decides to stay with his pregnant mistress despite her facial injuries incurred in the explosion on the plane and despite his history of refusing commitment. In each case, the character sacrifices private interest for the sake of the public. The disaster prompts this sacrifice.

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The Towering Inferno begins with Doug in a helicopter ensconced in privacy.



Doug flies over the world rather than interacting with it. His separation from the rest of the world is the separation of the capitalist subject.



Doug has a private bedroom in his public office. He can even have sex in the midst of the public world.



The hero joins those trapped in *The Towering Inferno*. One must accept one's status as lacking in the disaster film.

This trajectory from private interest to public concern is most clearly embodied by Doug Roberts (Paul Newman) in *The Towering Inferno*. This film begins with him ensconced in privacy. The credits appear over a series of shots of Doug's helicopter coming from the country into the city, where it lands on the rooftop of a skyscraper. The helicopter itself embodies privacy and isolation as it allows one to hover over the world rather than engaging in it. The shots of the helicopter emphasize its distance from the world that it flies above. The film visually emphasizes Doug's ability to navigate the cityscape without becoming involved in it.

After landing, Doug leaves the helicopter and goes down to his luxurious office, which, amazingly enough, has a bedroom inside where girlfriend Susan (Faye Dunaway) is waiting with champagne to have sex with him. Here, the private world has completely invaded the public: Doug's office includes a private bedroom where he can occupy himself with his sexual escapades. The mise-en-scène highlights the appeal of privacy: we see a spacious bedroom with seductive lighting and lavish furnishings. Privacy provides all this, plus sex and champagne. In addition, while talking with Susan, Doug expresses his desire to move to the country, to escape the public world of city life. *The Towering Inferno* begins with an absolute immersion in privacy. It shows the genuine appeal of private life with its helicopters, sex, and champagne.

But as the fire breaks out, Doug's attitude undergoes a fundamental transformation. He criticizes his own failure to ensure that public safety remained more important than profit in the building of the skyscraper. Then, he puts his own life at risk in order to save others. He voluntarily joins the people trapped at the top of the building to assist with their rescue and even goes into the fire to save a family of strangers. At the end of the film, he promises to consult with fire chief Michael O'Hallorhan (Steve McQueen) about the design of future buildings. He makes it clear that he plans to construct buildings with a sense of the public world, not just for his private interest or for maximum profit. While this might seem like a negligible concession in the face of global capitalism, it represents the



They use a lottery system to decide who descends first in *Towering Inferno*, which is the primal form of democracy in Jacques Rancière's conception.



Those invested in privacy revolt against the lottery. They are concerned only for their private lives.

type of concession that global capitalists typically refuse. By placing public safety ahead of private profit, the architect asserts a challenge to capitalist ideology, which demands that profit take primacy. By allowing the firefighter O'Hallorhan to play a role in the design of buildings, Doug gives the public realm a position to intervene in the reproduction of capital.

Among the characters who are trapped by the fire in *The Towering Inferno*, we see one of the great archetypal scenes of the disaster film—the establishment of what Jacques Rancière sees as an authentic democracy. For Rancière, democracy is not representative government but rule by those who have no authority to rule. In other words, in democracy, nothing authorizes rule. The best realization of this absence of authorization is for Rancière, the drawing of lots. The drawing of lots reveals the contingency of all ruling. As Rancière puts it in *Hatred of Democracy*,

“The scandal of democracy and of the drawing of lots which is its essence, is to reveal that ... the government of societies cannot but rest in the last resort on its own contingency.” [19]

The group at the top of the burning building in *The Towering Inferno* institutes a lottery to decide who will be the first taken to safety with the elevator or the breeches buoy. Despite the luxury setting, the lottery reintroduces the contingency of rule into the social arrangement and shows the reemergence of politics. Although the film's sexism—typical in disaster films of the 1970s—excludes women from the lottery and grants them priority, the lottery itself indicates that the social field has changed dramatically.

Even though there are wealthy people trapped at the top of the burning building, capital does not determine who has priority for being rescued. The film depicts a rogue attempt by several wealthy men to subvert the lottery system and grab priority for themselves as an ethical monstrosity. When many of these figures fall to their death because they prioritize their survival over everyone else's, the film makes clear that holding fast to privacy actually leads to the destruction of the private world itself. Unlike Doug, the film's hero, these characters fail to undergo the move from private to public that characterizes the disaster film.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Characterology under fire



The disaster results from the capitalist's shortcuts in *The Towering Inferno*. To make more money, the capitalist subject scrimps on safety.



Skyscraper isn't a disaster film because it has a villain. The disaster film creates universality precisely because there is no villain.



Insisting on surviving means death in the disaster film. This is the paradox of these films.

The disaster film typically has four character types that embody the different possible responses to the disaster and to the reintroduction of loss into the social field. The first two types treat the disaster as a non-event, as a merely empirical disruption of everyday life rather than as the return of a structuring absence. One continues the pursuit of capital in the face of disaster. These figures—what we might call the villains of the disaster film—often cause the disaster in the first place or worsen its impact because of their commitment to gaining profit. They cut corners in the construction of a skyscraper, for instance, which allows a fire to break out. The disaster film always shows these ruthlessly capitalist subjects as villainous and usually leaves them dead or marginalized. This is what happens to Simmons (Richard Chamberlin) in *The Towering Inferno*. His use of cheap wiring to increase profit margin causes the fire. He later plunges to his death when he is among those who try to bypass the lottery system, a death meted out according to the strict political morality of the disaster film.

Even though the unrepentant capitalist represents the quasi-villain of the disaster film, they are not, strictly speaking, villains. The genre is defined through the absence of an actual villain. That is, through not depicting an enemy, the disaster film—and the natural disaster—allow us to glimpse the universal. When one has an enemy to blame for the disaster, the universality that the disaster occasions does not appear. In fact, this is why right-wing leaders always try to find an enemy when disaster strikes.[20] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] If a particular enemy exists on the outside, a group then forms around resisting this figure. As a result, a film such as *Skyscraper* (Rawson Marshall Thurber, 2018), which seem to have all the characteristics of a disaster film, does not qualify as a disaster film. The presence of an enemy to defeat obliterates the universality that inheres in the actual disaster film.[21]

The second character type also refuses to acknowledge the disaster as an event but does recognize the threat that the disaster poses to life. These figures remain within the apolitical world in which private life and survival are the only values. They do whatever it takes to preserve their own lives regardless of how their actions impact others. Since life is for them the only value, they cannot imagine sacrificing or even risking their lives for others. Instead, they manipulate others and put others in danger in order to attempt to survive. The disaster film as a genre usually deals with such characters very harshly. When a group of men jump on a breeches buoy ahead of their proper turn in order to escape the approaching fire in *The Towering Inferno*, they all plunge to their deaths. A similar fate awaits all characters in the disaster film who demonstrate that their own survival is their only value.

In contrast, the other two character types from the disaster film, though they do try to survive, reveal that other values, such as ideas of equality or solidarity, trump their own survival. Such figures work together with others, abandon their personal interests and grievances for the sake of the common, and even sacrifice themselves when their sacrifice can benefit others. These figures represent the emergence of the public world within the confines of the disaster.





The heroes of the disaster film abandon their private worlds for the sake of the public. By investing in the public, they show where value lies.



Jaye Calder goes to the hospital to help despite the lava flowing toward it in *Volcano*. She puts her on life in danger for others.



Calder rejects the demands of her capitalist husband that she watch out only for herself. The contrast between these two characters marks the primary opposition of the disaster film.



Don Gallagher risks his life for everyone else in *Airport '77*, but he remains a lacking hero.

The third character type contributes to the group of survivors and puts self-interest aside for the sake of the collective. These characters, like Dr. Jaye Calder (Jacqueline Kim) in *Volcano* (Mick Jackson, 1997), assert fidelity to the common as a value even when it puts their own survival into question. Calder courts danger in order to treat people suffering burns from the lava and remains at the hospital despite the lava flowing directly toward it. By injecting themselves into the public world through care for others, these characters often defy others who cling only to private self-interest, as Calder does when she refuses her husband's demand that they escape from the path of the onrushing lava. [22]

Calder's husband specifically demands that she put herself ahead of the public world. While we see her frantically treating a patient in the chaos outside the hospital, her husband exclaims, "These people are strangers, Jaye. Are you doing to die for them? ... Answer me!" The film doesn't depict Calder paying attention to this plea. Instead, she continues to treat the injured patient and says, "I am answering you." By including Calder's answer as the lack of an answer, *Volcano* underlines the way that the disaster film constitutes the public world. It is through the assertion of absence that the disaster film reveals the public. The public is a collective world founded on what is missing in privacy, on the experience of loss in the private realm. Calder's heroic disregard for her own safety and defiance of her husband align her with the heroes of the disaster film.

The final character type is the hero of the disaster film. On the one hand, disaster films seem to reaffirm phallic white masculinity. In *The Towering Inferno*, fire chief Michael O'Hallorhan and architect Doug Roberts combine their strength and ingenuity to save the people from a seemingly inescapable burning skyscraper. In *The Poseidon Adventure*, Reverend Scott (Gene Hackman) leads a small group of survivors out of an overturned ocean-liner to safety. Even more heroically, in *Airport '77* (Jerry Jameson, 1977), Captain Don Gallagher (Jack Lemmon) swims out of a deeply submerged jet in order to signal for help. These incidences of the powerful male hero saving people from the menace of the disaster suggests that, while disaster films might reintroduce lack into the social field, they fill this lack in a classic way—with a phallic figure.

Despite the seemingly straightforward affirmation of phallic white masculinity, the disaster film actually reveals the impotence of phallic figures and the necessity of the hero's accepting lack rather than fetishistically disavowing it in the manner of the traditional Hollywood hero. The hero of the disaster film differs greatly from John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. Those who assert mastery without lack never prevail in the disaster film. The would-be hero who believes in his omnipotence always dies as a result of this belief in the disaster film—like Roy Nord (Viggo Mortensen) in *Daylight* (Rob Cohen, 1996). Convinced of his own ability to conquer even the most difficult situation, Roy unceremoniously dies



The figure of pure mastery, like Roy Nord in *Daylight*, always fails in the disaster film. He ends up dying of self-confidence.

beneath a cave-in while trying to find a way out of a collapsed tunnel. Roy exhibits total self-assurance right up to the point when thousands of tons of metal collapses on top of him. In contrast, Kit (Sylvester Stallone) emerges as the hero of *Daylight* because, unlike Roy, he constantly foregrounds his limitations and lack of mastery. Kit is not a phallic hero but a castrated one; his heroism comes not from his self-assurance but from having nothing left to lose, from being a subject of lack. In the disaster film, the hero is lacking every bit as much as all the other characters.



The disaster film hero must be a figure of lack, such as Kit in *Daylight*.



Kit rescues those trapped in *Daylight* because he has nothing to lose. For him, dying is almost preferable to living.

At the opening of *Daylight*, Kit, a former New York City fire chief, works as a cab driver after losing his job after his actions as fire chief led to multiple deaths. When he sees the tunnel cave in from his cab, he volunteers to enter the tunnel alone through the air ducts and attempt to rescue the people trapped inside. Kit enters without a clear plan of rescue and does not believe that he will ever leave the tunnel alive. His entrance into the tunnel appears as the heroic suicide of someone who has lost all sense of identity. Finally, Kit does help a small group of survivors to safety, though he and Madelyne (Amy Brenneman) only escape the tunnel by setting off an explosion and being sucked to through the riverbed to river's surface. This dramatic rescue comes not as a result of Kit's mastery of the situation but as a result of the absence of any other option.



The rescue comes out of desperation in *The Towering Inferno*.

The contrast between Kit and Roy in *Daylight* illustrates a sharp rejection of phallic masculinity in the disaster genre, and almost every disaster film contains a similar contrast. Even the most masculine disaster actors, Steve McQueen and Paul Newman in *The Towering Inferno*, act out of desperation rather than mastery and must accept their castration in order to act heroically. This rejection of the phallic hero separates the disaster film from the typical Hollywood action film even more than the presence of the disaster itself—and it defines the genre. The non-phallic hero of the disaster film indicates the importance that lack plays in disaster film: it is the confrontation with lack that creates the space for the reassertion of value.

The presence of the disaster highlights the hero's—and every subject's—absence of mastery. The disaster marks the limits of human capacity to conquer and subdue the natural world: nature produces lethal coldness, a comet on a collision course

with earth, or a tornado that can level the most well-constructed buildings. The danger that disaster brings reveals to both characters in the films and spectators an absolute negativity that they must engage with. In confronting that negativity, an idea of the common forms and a group assembles around this idea.

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| <p>The collective forms around negativity in <i>Volcano</i>. The eruption creates ash that causes everyone to look alike.</p> | <p>Harry Stamper dies for the collective in <i>Armageddon</i>.</p> |

The group of survivors in the disaster film clearly attempts to survive, but the way that they do so reflects the emergence of a value beyond mere private life. Characters put their lives at risk for the group and indeed often lose their lives in the effort to assist others, like Belle Rosen (Shelley Winters) in *The Poseidon Adventure* or Harry Stamper (Bruce Willis) in *Armageddon*. The question of private self-interest dissipates with the emergence of a new common. Those who insist on private self-interest and reject the common do not remain with the group and most often do not survive. In this way, life ceases to be a value sustainable outside its abandonment. It is only through accepting that other values trump survival that one can survive in the disaster film.

Public protections

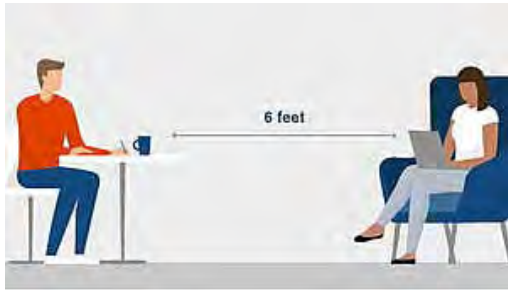
Unlike these filmic disasters, one effect of the coronavirus pandemic is that it has ensconced everyone in a private realm. If just talking with other people threatens to infect them or myself, we cannot engage physically in the public world. One remains safe and keeps others safe by staying within one's private domicile and avoiding all social contact. One even works, if it is possible, by staying home. Coronavirus seems to lead inextricably to the further triumph of privacy and thus to the forward march of the capitalist system. It appears to push us in the opposite direction of the disaster film—toward privacy, not the public world.

The primary measure for dealing with the coronavirus outbreak was a massive campaign of social distancing, which involves staying at least six feet from others and engaging in prolonged contact only via online platforms. From the perspective of Giorgio Agamben and his critique of biopower, this response to the disaster is the real disaster. In the attempt to keep other people alive, we sacrifice community for the sake of survival. In other words, Agamben criticizes the response to the pandemic for contributing to the contemporary decimation of the public world. For Agamben, the response entails the death of the social bond and the unleashing of rampant barbarism.

As Agamben sees it, the problem is that in the act of social distancing we



Giorgio Agamben criticizes social distancing in response to the coronavirus pandemic. He believes that sociality requires proximity.



All sociality requires distance, contra what Agamben claims.



It is difficult to distinguish Giorgio Agamben's response to the pandemic from Donald Trump's.

implicitly view others as a threat rather than as part of a shared social order. In one of his diatribes against the measures taken to stop the pandemic, he writes,

“Bare life—and the danger of losing it—is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them. Other human beings ... are now seen solely as possible spreaders of the plague whom one must avoid at all costs and from whom one needs to keep oneself at a distance of at least a meter.”[23]

The other is a private individual that represents a danger for me. Within the response to the pandemic and its demand for social distancing, there is no opportunity, Agamben claims, for the public to emerge out of the private. This response condemns us to privacy, which is why Agamben polemicizes against it so vehemently.

The practice of social distancing earns Agamben's particular ire because he sees it not only as an act of violence against the community but also as violence toward language itself. In a later essay devoted to elaborating his attack on the political response to the pandemic, Agamben places “social distancing” in quotation marks, so as to make clear that he sees the term as oxymoronic or, as he himself puts it, “a significant euphemism.”[24] From this point of view, distancing can never be social because sociability derives from proximity. The social bond is a bond that holds people together, not apart.

Contra Agamben and the critique of biopower, it is my claim that social distancing, far from being an oxymoron, is the paradigmatic form of the social bond. In this sense, the emergence of social distancing as a political response to the pandemic has the ability to instruct us concerning how the social bond is actually constituted. Now, every social bond requires distance because it must allow for the space of conflicting forms of enjoyment. However, by distancing, one doesn't retreat into privacy but avows a distinctly public space. In this sense, the actual disaster of the coronavirus pandemic has had the same effect as the disaster film. It makes apparent the public world that had hitherto been obscured by privacy.

Agamben doesn't see this. He fundamentally misreads what's at stake in the phenomenon of social distancing. Far from simply protecting my own private life and attempting to ensure my own survival, I engage in social distancing because I understand that my comportment constantly intrudes on others. By keeping my distance, I reveal my concern for them and for the social bond as such. It is those, like Agamben, who express disdain for social distancing and wearing a mask who exhibit contempt for others and for their connection with others.[25]

The concept of social distancing enables us to understand what makes the social bond possible. We can live in society now because we keep our distance from each



The natural disaster creates an opportunity to see the universality that underlies all social relations. Through the disaster, our shared lack becomes apparent.



Even the worst disaster films can reveal the political opening that capitalist society renders invisible.

other and acknowledge the existence of a public space, one that has nothing to do with physical space. It exists in the crowds of urban Tokyo much more than in the open spaces of rural Oklahoma because the people crowded together in a Tokyo subway accept the idea of public space, while those on an Oklahoma ranch defending their property with guns reject it. Social distancing is the acknowledgment of the necessity of a public interruption of our private existence. This gives it a political content that is not at first evident.

The coronavirus pandemic functions like a disaster in the disaster film. Even though it isolates people and keeps them apart from each other, it nonetheless also highlights the universality that binds them together. In a coronavirus lockdown, we are apart together. The critique of measures used to deal with the pandemic misses the social dimension of social distancing, mistaking physical distance for private isolation. Natural disasters—either on film or in reality—create political revelations. We must seize on the opportunity that disasters provide in order to glimpse the working of universality beneath the dominance of privacy.

A common absence

If it is the case that it is easier for us to envision the end of the world than the end of capitalism, the disaster film uses the fantasy of the former in order to provide a hint of the latter. The typical disaster film does not conclude, of course, with the end of the capitalist economy. Capitalist economy and social structure survive even the most severe disasters, like a comet striking the earth's surface in *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998). But the ideology that supports contemporary capitalism and sustains its most ruthless manifestations is not among the survivors of the disaster. The disaster film attempts to transform the spectator from a being of private life, a mere survivor, into a political subject in the public world. It shows us that within the threat to private life we do not have to succumb to capitalism's depoliticization but must reassert the value of the common as an alternative. Maybe it takes a disaster for us to recognize the catastrophe that capitalism has wrought.

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Notes

1. The outbreak of what Naomi Klein calls *disaster capitalism*, the attempt to use a disaster to impose heightened forms of austerity, does not help one through the disaster. It represents an attempt to escape the egalitarian political impulse inherent in the disaster. See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador., 2008). [[return to page 1](#)]
2. See, for instance, Don Kaye's account of the disaster films of the 1970s. Punning on the film's title, he claims that "time was not on this dud's side." It is a "cliché-ridden cheesefest." Dan Kaye, *The 1970s: Decade of the Disaster Movie*, SYFYWire (2019):
<https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/the-1970s-decade-of-the-disastermovie#:~:text=Disaster%20movies%20have%20been%20with,up%20in%20every%20decade%20since.>
3. This scene is one that detractors of the film mock with special glee. The flowing lava is one of the film's cheesiest special effects. But rather than detract from the film's political point, the falsity of the effect makes it clearer. The lava exists as a pretense for the public group to form, which is why it is not natural at all.
4. Slavoj Žižek offers one version of this position, which he acknowledges that he borrows from Fredric Jameson. He says, "it seems easier to imagine the 'end of the world' than a far more modest change in the mode of production, as if liberal capitalism is the 'real' that will somehow survive even under conditions of a global ecological catastrophe." Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1994), 1.
5. For a critique of the concept of the humanitarian crisis and the predominant responses to it, see Ilan Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
6. Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: New Press, 1998), 7-8.
7. Christopher Lasch calls this historical moment the reign of a culture of narcissism. He chronicles the massive turn inward that occurs in U.S. society, but the same turn appears all around the world. It represents the worldwide triumph of the logic of capitalism over the communist alternative. Even though actually existing communist states would require twenty years to die, their spiritual death was already evident by 1970.
8. Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower Press, 2001), 53.
9. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, trans. Samuel Moore (New York: Verso, 1998), 38.
10. Marx points out the necessarily cynical bent of the political economists and

notes how these figures usher in the triumph of cynicism over hypocrisy. He claims, "This political economy ... displays a *cosmopolitan*, universal energy which overthrows every restriction and bond so as to establish itself instead as the sole politics, the sole universality, the sole limit and sole bond. Hence it must throw aside this *hypocrisy* in the course of its further development and come out in its complete cynicism." Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 129.

11. This is an idea prominent in Alain Badiou's analysis of the revolutionary event. The event, as he sees it, marks a political break from the economic situation. The very assertion of politics becomes an implicit fight against capitalism's reduction of the political subject to the homo economicus dominated by interests rather than by values.

12. Friedrich Hayek, a leading defender of capitalism, makes the antithesis between capitalism and politics clear in his attack on the idea of justice. According to Hayek, "the whole conception of social or distributive justice is empty and meaningless; and there will therefore never exist agreement on what is just in this sense.... I am certain, however, that nothing has done so much to destroy the juridical safeguards of individual freedom as the striving after this mirage of social justice." Friedrich Hayek, *Economic Freedom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 388-389. For Hayek, any attempt to include justice within governance violates the individual's economic freedom, which is the basis of capitalist relations of production. Capitalist freedom demands the abandonment of justice.

13. For Deleuze and Guattari, the problem with capitalism is that its revolutionizing or deterritorializing tendency is not complete, that it interrupts deterritorialization with a reterritorialization which reinserts limits or barriers into the production process. But this vision of capitalism too quickly identifies economics and politics. Capitalism undermines political struggle not through reterritorializing structures but through transforming the call for political freedom into a call for economic freedom. In this sense, capitalism's deterritorializing tendency works on behalf of depoliticization, not against it, as Deleuze and Guattari contend.

14. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 38.

15. The locus classicus for Neo-Darwinism's commitment to the logic of capitalism is Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*. Here, Dawkins argues that this logic is simply a fact of nature, something written into the human genetic material. He writes, "at the gene level, altruism must be bad and selfishness good." Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 36. Dawkins looks into the human gene and finds the fundamental presupposition of capitalist relations of production.

16. Carl Schmitt attributes the disappearance of politics to the absence of the distinction between friend and enemy. He says, "A world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated, a completely pacified globe, would be a world without the distinction of friend and enemy and hence a world without politics." Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35. From this perspective, war—or the risk of war—must be a constant for human life, if it is to remain political. [[return to page 2](#)]

17. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 38.

18. This is not the case with every disaster film. There are disaster films that function as purely ideological and anti-political works, and they do so by failing to depict any values other than life arising as a result of the disaster. Such aborted

disaster films include *Airport 1975* (Jack Smith, 1974) and *Poseidon* (Wolfgang Peterson, 2006). I am tempted to say that despite the presence of the disaster, these films simply do not belong to the genre.

19. Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 47.

20. During the coronavirus outbreak, Donald Trump constantly referred to the virus using the racist epithet, “Kung Flu.” He did so in order to conjure up an enemy responsible for the natural disaster. The existence of an enemy blocks the emergence of universality. [[return to page 3](#)]

21. In addition to employing a villain, *Skyscraper* shows the capitalist as a beneficent figure. While his actions contribute to the disaster, he is never acting purely on behalf of capital, which separates him from the capitalist figure in *The Towering Inferno* or *When Time Ran Out*.

22. The anticapitalism of *Volcano* becomes clear when the building that Calder’s husband has just built must be exploded in order to divert the onrushing lava and save millions of lives. It is only the destruction of capital—not its accumulation—that can save us from the disaster in *Volcano*.

23. Giorgio Agamben, “Clarifications,” trans. Adam Kotsko, *An und für sich* blog (17 March 2020): <https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/>

24. Giorgio Agamben, “A Question,” trans. Adam Kotsko, *An und für sich* blog (15 April 2020): <https://itself.blog/2020/04/15/giorgio-agamben-a-question/>.

25. Agamben goes so far as to attack Pope Francis for not exposing himself to the virus. He writes, “The Church, under a Pope who calls himself Francis, has forgotten that Francis embraced lepers. It has forgotten that one of the works of mercy is that of visiting the sick. It has forgotten that the martyrs teach that we must be prepared to sacrifice our life rather than our faith and that renouncing our neighbor means renouncing faith.” Giorgio Agamben, “A Question,” <https://itself.blog/2020/04/15/giorgio-agamben-a-question/>. What this attack misses is that visiting those sick with coronavirus would not just put Pope Francis himself at risk. It would almost ensure that he would infect many others. This is certainly a perverse understanding of Christian compassion.





In De Wilde's adaptation of Austen's novel, Emma and other characters spend a lot of time gazing out of windows and through other panes of glass.

Screening Jane Austen: Austen, adaptation, and life at a distance

by [Jamison Kantor](#)

Before the 2020 global pandemic consigned Americans to their homes, the last thing I did in public was go to the movies. The film I chose was Autumn De Wilde's *Emma*. (2020), a relatively faithful—if conspicuously stylized—adaptation of Jane Austen's 1815 novel, which Janeites regularly hail as her masterpiece. On a weekday of my first ever faculty research leave and, after finishing a draft of a book introduction the day before, I was “rewarding” myself as academics often do with a leisure activity related to my field. During that afternoon showing in late winter, the theater seats were already socially distanced before this idea became a directive in everyday life. We in the audience put away our phones (no doubt some were trying to keep on top of the developing public health situation) and attended to the larger screen in front of us. Quiet and separated by several rows each, we were ready to view an adaptation of a novel concerned almost entirely with social relationships or perhaps even with the sociological, how people in proximity to one another behave, form institutions, and carry on historical memory and traumas.

Sociologists who witnessed us afternoon filmgoers participating in English Regency society through the flickering screen might have called the experience “parasocial.” By that I mean an experience in which you establish a (typically) one-sided, non-reciprocal relationship with a figure or group represented in media. [1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The parasocial situation is an inorganic one, as viewers must select and curate their interactions with representations. Part of its appeal is the temporary suspension of the presence of the screen through which the interaction occurs, the momentary dissolving of mediating technology, a disintegration that allows the affective currents between viewer and virtual society to flow freely. Just before *Emma*. started, we were tethered to the small screens on our phones, operating them, I suspect, with some measure of intention; we were flipping between weather apps, news updates, and text messages. The big screen made things different. For a couple of hours at least, it suspended our reciprocal relation with these devices and absorbed us into Austen's fictional village of Highbury and the lives of its inhabitants.

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... The effect of the window gazing is not just metacritical—as characters remind viewers that they are watching a movie—but also parasocial, recalling our own experiences with screen-based media and its role as a necessary infrastructure in public life.

Yet, in anticipation of the parasocial moment, one that would temporarily melt away the walls of the theater, as soon as the film began I became aware of how many screens, media devices, and socializing technologies were implied within De Wilde's adaptation. Austen's "handsome, clever, and rich" heroine, Emma, as De Wilde interprets her, regularly gazes into mirrors—less a sign perhaps of narcissism than Emma's overconfidence in her own perception, and she gazes out of windows where natural light illuminates her face like the perfect Instagram filter.[2]



De Wilde regularly places her figures in front of windows as well as behind them. A backlighting technique replicates the effect of the computer monitor or television screen, all while maintaining the authenticity of a period piece that is lit naturally. In one shot, De Wilde evokes the grand screen of the cinema, placing Emma in front of a massive painting.



In fact, social media seems to be one of the clearest design influences on the film. The result is that in a film/novel all about rumor, misapprehension, and little acts of provincial espionage, such references to the social media screen could be an example of what John L. Sullivan calls the "lateral surveillance" of Internet



Anya Taylor-Joy, who plays the lead in 2020's *Emma*, considers the character a harbinger of social media influencers. In a scene that gestures to this role, Emma considers her own, highly curated image through a reflecting mirror, while a friend looks on. The final shot of the film also features a mediating screen, Emma's decorated wedding veil. The veil offers a subtle take on the digital picture filter, which can "soften" the face of the subject, and add small icons, such as flowers. Fashionably independent while married, this final shot replicates scholars' longstanding debate over the complex feminism of Austen's heroine.



sociality, where friends and acquaintances look “out” to monitor one another, even as they fail to monitor “up,” checking the corporate power of the platform.[3]

A first-time director, De Wilde already had a long career as an indie rock pop photographer, staging musicians and L.A. luminaries in eccentric “curated candids,” the very kind of image that proliferates across Twitter and Instagram. The actor Anya Taylor-Joy, who plays Emma with a doe-eyed insouciance, remarked that in our own age Emma “would make a perfect social media influencer.”[4] Because she is, in Taylor-Joy’s words, a “dictator of taste,” Emma also defines the images of others, something literalized in the film’s treatment of a famous sequence in which Emma poses and draws a (comically average) portrait of her naïve friend Harriet Smith.[5] And, in a moment only referenced briefly by Austen in the original text, De Wilde devotes a scene to the portrait’s ridiculous frame, one chosen by the smarmy Mr. Elton to flatter Emma. For a novel so concerned with people living in close vicinity to one another—and with their face-to-face interactions, however misinterpreted—De Wilde’s *Emma* is filled with objects that virtualize the subject and mediate it away from direct contact: still images, reflective screens of light, and the limiting borders of a frame.

I have thought about this adaptation regularly as a kind of harbinger for the screened, hypermediated socialization that has come to characterize the last few months. Many of our lives, professional and personal, now take place through a display of some kind, whether it’s the smartphone, computer monitor, or home theater. Given the fact that I regularly feature Austen in my courses—and since, along with many other things, *Emma* is itself about tutelage and guidance, of both the good and bad varieties—I have also considered De Wilde’s adaptation as a premonition of how we spend our time teaching now. True, there are no references to Zoom or collaborative “team” apps among the village gentry of the English Regency. But Austen’s novels feature countless scenes in which characters relate to and obsess over the mediations of others, their handwriting, portrait, or a circulating rumor. (And the rumor is one of the barest, oldest forms of media, in so far as the rumor-spreader acts as the *medias*, the mere middle layer of a communication.) The media object pervades Austen, as do scenes of subjects interpreting mere representations of others, trying to form social bonds at a distance. We might recognize all this evidence, but what might be pedagogical tactics that vivify it for students? How to show them that the novels are just as much about mediated interactions—relationships established across space through nineteenth-century aesthetic technologies—as they are about direct, human-to-human contact? How do we screen Jane Austen?

One obvious answer would be “have students watch the adaptations.” As De Wilde’s stylish film suggests, Austen films can be very self-referential about the media in which they’re conveyed. For example, Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* (1995), the exuberant SoCal adaptation of *Emma*, is filled with references to film and television. At one point, Cher Horowitz—who embodies Emma as a 90s valley girl—attempts to seduce her classmate Christian by sharing a movie with him.[6] (Christian brings over *Spartacus* [1960] and *Some Like it Hot* [1959], because he “ha[s] a thing for Tony Curtis,” an indication of his sexuality that Cher fails to notice.) Other adaptations highlight media objects that were more familiar to Austen herself, such as the print novel. The BBC’s 2007 version of *Northanger Abbey* features a pivotal scene in which two principle characters bond over their appreciation of Walter Scott and the scandalous Lord Byron.[7] This moment gestures to one of the moral lessons in Austen’s original, the tenuousness of associations established through fiction and mutual fantasies.

But while these examples may highlight for students Austen’s relation to the media form—images, books, theatrical performance—they do not always convey that one-sided parasocial experience. Rather, they tend to show social bonds



Before her directorial debut, DeWilde had a career as a pop and indie-rock photographer in L.A. Many of her photos might be described as “curated candids,” a genre of the social media image in which the subject poses for an everyday activity. DeWilde shot movie posters, too, such as the iconic one associated with 2017’s *I, Tonya*. Also featured above, DeWilde’s portrait of Beck, envisioned as a kind of deconstructed Ziggy Stardust, for the cover of the album *Sea Change* (2002).

formed *through* media consumption, with the object acting as a conduit for socialization, not *with* media consumption, attachments to a thing that stand-in for another subject entirely.[8] Put in the idiom of media studies, these examples from Austen may transmit a kind of parasociality more akin to broad fandom or fan-culture than, in the words of one scholar, the “presumed intimacy” that can arise between a person and the representation of another, distant subject, so-called “empty apparitions.”[9] This is not always a bad thing. Students who are newer to Austen’s prose may need help recognizing how the novelist conveys the subtle drama of human relations in mere small talk or everyday encounters, in situations where closeness and familiarity and not distance are sources of tension and intrigue.



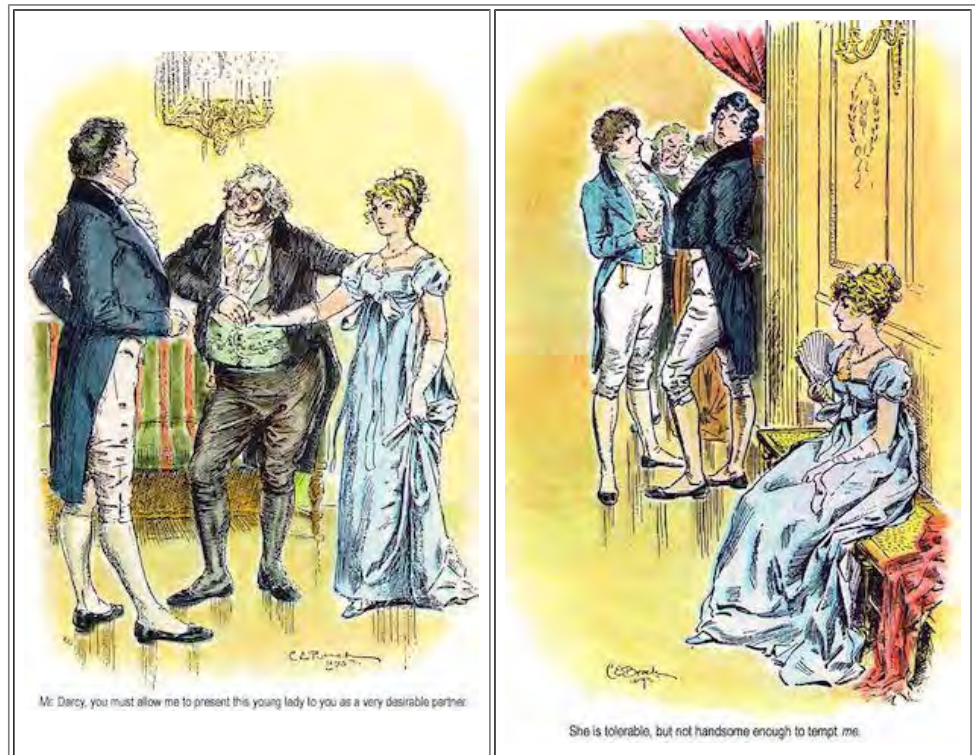
Two examples of Austenian social bonding through media. First, Cher attempts to seduce Christian via a movie in Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* (1995), the savvy, 90s SoCal adaptation of *Emma*.



Next, Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe bond over illicit literature in the BBC’s *Northanger Abbey* (2007). The novelist’s occasional example of queer sexuality—the eros between two women or, presumably, a straight woman and gay man—are given a distinct parasocial form in these media moments.

In the past, one of my Austen classroom activities highlighted the awkwardness of mass group socialization (prohibition #1 in a pandemic) under a strict regime of manners and etiquette. We’ll start by reading through a scene that takes place in a Regency ballroom or other large gathering space. While students point out the small details that advance the narrative or deepen a character, they tend to overlook the small, customary gestures and the routines of deference or authority. On first read-through, they find this conduct to be completely natural, just part of the fabric of the world displayed in the text. Then, I ask students to stand up and perform the scene. We’ll assign parts for dialogue, distribute props (the empire waist gown; the cards for the whist table), and I’ll read the narrator’s part as stage directions.

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One of the foremost illustrators of Austen's works was C.E. Brock, who provided hand-colored line drawings for all of her novels. Featured here are two representations derived from *Pride and Prejudice*, which is filled with scenes of group social interaction and inter-class mingling, especially early in the novel.



Grouped together in various cliques, obliged to shift their affect when encountering denizens of different economic classes, students begin to realize that Austen's prose conveys a much different message about manners: how awkward and prohibiting they are. The idea, say, that women are obliged to play pianoforte in public upon request can thus strike them as simultaneously normal and, given the subtle revelations delivered by Austen's prose when it is performed with other people, totally odd. With more advanced students, I'll finish the activity by bringing up the late-eighteenth-century "war of ideas," as literary critic Marilyn Butler puts it, in which Austen was forming her literary mind.[10] For the novelist, manners are second nature, exchanges that according to Edmund Burke, bind society together. At the same time, Austen also interprets manners as strange impositions upon personal liberty, a critique that she may have derived from Mary Wollstonecraft.

This performance activity may be one way to "screen" Austen, to use a media form (in this case, impromptu theater) as a conduit for broader insight about the world represented in a novel. Moreover, as it recreates interactions in the quiet drawing room, raucous ball, or town garment shop, the activity may also double as a miniaturized experience of the formation of a public-sphere. And the idea of the public sphere, with its classic expression in late eighteenth-century forums and circulating material, has been critical to studies of the formation of literary publics, as well as the development of the media concept of the mass audience, whether it is considered the dangerous "crowd" or the rational "people." [11]



Brock's illustrations of Elizabeth Bennet gazing at Darcy's portrait. The pen ink drawing shows a more restrained Elizabeth, who looks at the portrait with the "earnest contemplation" of a gallery visitor. However, in Brock's color illustration, Elizabeth leans into the portrait, prefiguring the intimate, even amatory, interpretation of this scene in some film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*. (See page 2)

But such a lesson plan is unavailable right now. And because it does not speak to the isolation and virtual environments with which students are living, even if it could be done online, this activity seems unsuited to the moment. Given the prohibition on physicalizing a group or crowd—that social formation integral to the concept of media audience and enlightenment modernity—we seem better suited currently to emphasize the novel's scenes of solitary aesthetic consumption or analysis, moments when characters find themselves alone and compelled by art or letters, especially if those objects signify another person. [12] Despite our impression that Austen's fiction is relentlessly crowded—known for the packed carriage ride or the awkward holiday party with super-extended family—examples of this quiet, "distanced" contemplation abound in her fiction.

One of the most prominent instances of a lone media encounter occurs in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), when the heroine Elizabeth Bennet visits Pemberley, the familial manor of Mr. Darcy, with whom, at this point in the novel, Elizabeth has an ambivalent relationship at best. Elizabeth is touring the grounds in Darcy's absence and comes across his portrait in a picture gallery (162). Like our desire to seek out friendly or appealing media forms, Elizabeth browses the hall with some intention, "in quest of the only face whose features would be known to her," and yet, when she encounters Darcy's portrait, it takes command, "fix[ing] his eyes upon herself" (162). The image prompts Elizabeth to spend "several minutes...in earnest contemplation" leading her to "a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance" (162). Here, Darcy's portrait reverses the circuit of intention, "arrest[ing]" Elizabeth who originally chose to stop and look.

It is notable that Austen's language about the power of art seems to dovetail with Kant's contemporaneous remarks on aesthetic things that convey "purposiveness without purpose." [13] But the scene also gestures to the experience of media parasociality, inasmuch as the material quality of the portrait fades when Elizabeth gazes at it, leaving behind "a gentle sensation," or lingering affect that produces a social cohesion with Darcy's invisible presence (162). (Admittedly, Elizabeth has been primed to view the portrait favorably by Darcy's housekeeper, who calls him "the best landlord, and the best master" [161]).

The Pemberley gallery scene is also a critical part of the narrative. Occurring almost exactly at the halfway point of the novel, it is one of the pivotal moments where Elizabeth starts to reassess her feelings for Darcy and, by extension, to reimagine the patrician ideology for which he stands. Liberal-minded and irreverent, Elizabeth may be one of nineteenth-century literature's paragons of women's liberation, but in this moment she seems to internalize the tenets of a conservative worldview. In that perspective, surface appearance is an indication of moral goodness, the sensations a barometer for virtue, and noblesse oblige a community's organizing principle. Here, Elizabeth's virtual encounter with Darcy leads to her broadening ideological horizons she had hitherto never attempted, or even resisted.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Joe Wright's film *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) turns Elizabeth's encounter with Darcy's image into a sensuous experience. Instead of a portrait, Wright uses a three-dimensional bust of Darcy...

Given the centrality of this scene to the novel—and the commentary it offers on the power of visual media to “arrest” the viewer and provoke different social feelings—it is useful to observe how screen adaptations have handled Elizabeth's encounter with Darcy's image. Joe Wright's 2005 film includes the tour of the Pemberley gallery, but replaces Darcy's portrait with a plaster bust. Although it seizes Elizabeth's attention, the three-dimensional object is more lifelike and thus less akin to the “flat” representations that characterize our current virtual environments.[14] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Another striking difference from Austen's original—in which Elizabeth takes a patient, sensible account of her feelings towards the portrait—is the scene's amatory mood: Wright has Elizabeth make her way through a series of partial nudes before encountering the bust, which prompts a crescendo in the film's score.

The 1995 BBC miniseries is more or less faithful to the text, but the arresting image of Darcy for which this adaptation is known was wholly invented. Just after the gallery tour, Darcy emerges from a lake on his grounds wearing only undergarments, a moment that has become a signal example of the inverted male gaze and something of a career highlight for Colin Firth, who played the romantic lead.[15] If both adaptations include the portrait scene, they also seem to convey the encounter as a primarily intimate—even sensual—experience, instead of one that also enlarges Elizabeth's social horizons and sense of moral “gratitude.”



.... places it among sculpted nudes, and brings up the score, accentuating what Jillian Heydt-Stevenson describes as Austen's awareness of “the pleasures that a woman can take in visualizing the male body” (332).



This scene in the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) is more sober....



.... .but it is followed by the notorious “wet shirt” sequence



..... where Darcy emerges from a pond on his grounds.

There are a few ways we can get students to recognize the richer social feeling that Austen conveys in this scene and others. I suspect most wouldn't have to be convinced that images can be targets of judgment and substitutes for interpersonal connection. The current popularity of apps such as Instagram and TikTok have shown younger social media users to be even more committed to

navigating series of representations rather than text-based exchange, which is the major format for Facebook and Twitter, whose users now seem to skew older. Instead, the challenge may be to induce students to see the social media image—or the virtual persona or avatar—as a rich field of inquiry rather than as a consumable object or a momentary aesthetic stimulant. This isn't to say that students don't recognize social media's profound impact on their lives, but they do not often consider how its influence is so pervasive that, like any institution, it seems to fade into the background of experience.

One approach would be to have them rewrite this scene using contemporary social media. Undergraduate members of a virtual Jane Austen class could be assigned roles—Darcy, Elizabeth, Darcy's housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, and Elizabeth's aunt and uncle, the Gardiners—akin to the original “manners” activity, where students perform one of the novel's party sequences. After a classroom discussion about the relevance of the portrait in the novel and the idea of “socially distanced connection,” students could vote on the most appropriate digital space to represent the interaction, a detail that keeps the exercise current with online trends. While those who have taken on principal roles would create the visual content for their character—a virtual footprint of activities created through photos and video clips—others might be tasked with building each profile, either by setting up the principle accounts and adding key details, or by playing other, tertiary characters who respond in public or through private DMs and, thus, produce a backstory.

The space on which the assignment is developed would matter, too. Perhaps, because of the exclusivity and opulence of Darcy's manor where the portrait encounter takes place, students would choose to situate his avatar behind a paywall or within a subscription site (for which the Gardiners had access). Additionally, students who ascertain the class registers of the various cliques in Austen's world—the upwardly mobile professionals, landed gentry, and title-holders—would attach status to certain social media sites. Such an approach would be supported by the increasing capacity of these spaces to interface with one another—of course, not without the subtle indication of their original domains, another socioeconomic signal for which students would have to account.

Larger classes might expand the activity to include different scenes from the novel. Elizabeth's careful parsing of Darcy's letter could become an exercise in text-message scrutiny, with other friends weighing-in on the language and medium used to transmit them. The “off-screen” report of Mr. Bennet's actions to track down his daughter Lydia—who has fled to Scotland to elope with the rakish Mr. Wickham—could be assembled through updates and peripheral sightings posted on various internet apps, as a chorus of voices weigh-in on their whereabouts. This activity enhance students' awareness of the kind of Austenian codes of manners and behavioral norms that exist in today's digital realms. In addition, their intentional construction of these exchanges could lead students to better theorize the process of judgment and public feeling that apply to their own social media engagements.

An advanced group of undergraduates allowed significantly more time could create their own Austen adaptations by filming these virtual encounters. Acting as a small film and television production, students could rewrite a scene and shoot it using a combination of live action and social media elements. I anticipate that, for today's undergraduates, the synthesis of these two forms would be familiar. A bonanza of streaming shows created for young adults—such as *Riverdale* (2017-), *American Vandal* (2017-8), and *On My Block* (2018-)—have naturalized the use of Internet devices and applications, integrating them into the flow of narrative. Filming a social media adaptation of a scene from Austen would also mean reckoning with three “layers” of mediated interaction, three examples of personal connections made through aesthetic objects over 200 years. Students attend to





Over the last few years, television shows made for young adults have incorporated into their narrative social media and digital applications made for instant communication, such as text messaging and online posting. In *Riverdale* (2017-), *American Vandal* (2017-8), and *On My Block* (2018-), shown top to bottom, protagonists navigate major plot points through their mediating devices.



Austen scholars have historicized the visual culture of the Regency through a various paradigms and practices of the early nineteenth century. William Gilpin's popular concept of the "picturesque"—developed here in a landscape by Gilpin—can be found throughout Austen's novels.

the portraits, letters, and rumors in Austen's novel, the image-based composition of film and television, and the complex lattice of information and iconography that comprise hypermedia.

One could even integrate this assignment into a graduate course, prompting grads to develop their pedagogy while familiarizing them with theoretical approaches to the novel, art and media, or the sociology of literature. Because of Austen's applicability to literary periods and scholarly modes, college instructors often teach one of her novels in an undergraduate and graduate offering simultaneously. This presents a unique opportunity—even in a virtual setting—to have grad students advise and collaborate with undergrads on the same text. Each class could be arranged into units (perhaps "households" is the more appropriate Austenian term) comprised of several undergraduates and a grad adviser, who suggest adaptations of a scene's subtle details, facilitate group interaction across digital platforms, and eventually situate their experience within a growing body of research on Austen and social networks.[17] (I can imagine grads making cameos in the production as, say, town elders or important figures only referenced occasionally by the narrator.) The result is a shift away from the traditional TA discussion section and towards collaborative experience, one that reflects the expansive media environment through which today's students access—and assess—culture.

For Austen scholars, whether they are new or experienced, this activity presents an opportunity to rethink the very concept of media and aesthetic encounter within the novels and broader life in the Regency. One way to begin linking the novels to what media scholars call the "common cultural currency" of spectatorship would be to revisit the long affiliation between Austen and the philosophy of sociality.[18] In the novels, encounters with art objects—or experiences with art that creates some sort of social cohesion—have been considered generally through two theories related to the construction of public consciousness. These moments may indicate examples of cultural capital, or a character's participation in a definitive aesthetic regime that signals their place in the social hierarchy. Or scholars may see them as gestures to Kantian disinterestedness, an ability to step outside of the self momentarily and render a universal judgment about the beautiful that will hold true for everyone—no small thing in Austen, given her use of free indirect discourse and its formal mesh of subjectivity, voices that often seem to be totally encased within their own perspective. Of course, various other approaches to art and spectatorship in Austen criticism are premised on historical contexts, like the concept of the picturesque, a ubiquitous style of composition and "mode of seeing" made popular in late-eighteenth-century essays and guidebooks or the fashionable practice of the gallery visit.[19]

WHAT JANE SAW

1796
Shakespeare Gallery



1813
British Institution



You are invited to time travel to two art exhibitions witnessed by Jane Austen: the Sir Joshua Reynolds retrospective in 1813 or the Shakespeare Gallery as it looked in 1796. These two Georgian blockbusters took place, years apart, in the same London exhibition space at 52 Pall Mall (it no longer exists). When Austen visited in 1813, the building housed the British Institution, an organization promoting native artists. On her earlier London visit in 1796, it was the first-ever museum dedicated to William Shakespeare.

To familiarize readers with the trendy practice of the picture gallery visit, Janine Barchas established the website “What Jane Saw” (<http://www.whatjanesaw.org/>), which immerses its user in two digitized exhibitions toured by Austen herself.

To exemplify these first two approaches—and a third one reflecting our contemporary media ecosystem—let’s return to the portrait scene in *Emma*. Just before Emma decides to draw Harriet—in the hopes that this will nurture the infatuation that Emma believes Mr. Elton has for her friend—she reflects on the “merit in every [one of her] drawing[s]” (27). Although she is self-aware enough to recognize that “her reputation for accomplishment [was] often higher than it deserved,” Emma realizes that her acquaintances will respond to all of her portraits optimistically. “A likeness pleases everybody,” says the narrator, adopting Emma’s inner perspective (27). Initially, this comment could be read as an indication of how Emma understands cultural capital. A skill practiced by “proper ladies,” painting and drawing demonstrated cultivated taste and were meant in part to please those whose approbation could mean acceptance into a certain class. However, because Emma is, for the most part, the chief arbiter of taste in her village, the comment is deliciously recursive, an indictment of the very structure of social classification: not even as the most admired arbiter of taste can she depart from the codes of judgment foisted upon her.

Another way of reading the comment is to see it as a Kantian gesture. This momentary suspension of personal self-interest leads Emma to recognize the universal judgment that art inspires, that likenesses “[please] everybody” (27). Again, such a reading may be undercut by other contextualizing remarks. Just before this axiom, Emma’s companions are said to be “in ecstasies” viewing her other work, not the kind of sober disinterestedness usually affiliated with Kantian judgment (27).

However, in light of her attempt to encourage “raptures for Harriet’s face” through a portrait exchange with Mr. Elton, Emma’s commentary here could evoke a more contemporary interpretation of the media object as a parasocial device. Consider that, like the amorous miniatures occasionally carried by Austen’s characters, the portrait acts as a stand-in, or avatar, for Harriet. But, unlike those miniatures, the portrait does not validate any real bond between Mr.

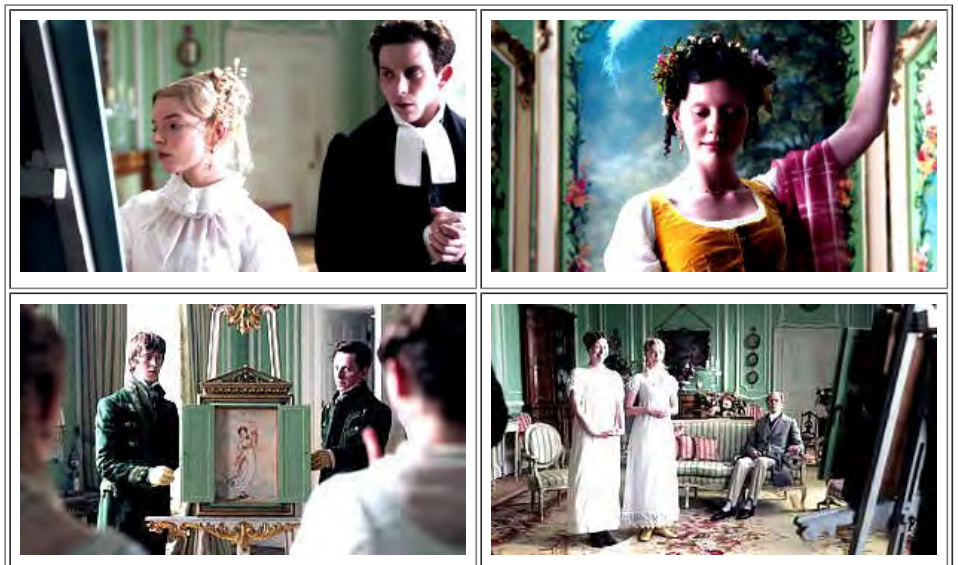


Elton and Harriet. On the contrary, Elton wants the portrait because Emma has created it. And because Emma is unaware of Mr. Elton's "raptures" for her, his desire for the object she has created becomes a one-sided interaction, an unreciprocated connection to a content designer, one of the definitive qualities in contemporary parasocial relationships.[20] In fact, Mr. Elton even offers to go to London to have the portrait framed, improving the hardware on which the image will be displayed.

In other words, Harriet's image is not just a focal point for the misplaced intimacy that permeates the novel, but a representation of a virtual self that, when circulated among a public, encodes within it a range of possible outcomes, not least of which is the adoration for its creator, who, like the social media influencer, is a kind of village celebrity. Another analogy for Mr. Elton here would be someone who appreciates a film because of its director, not necessarily because of its technical or narrative qualities. The comment that "a likeness pleases everybody" could thus stand as Emma's insight, however unintentional, that virtual personas—"likeness[es]" of faces—circulate among a public whose social ties are derived chiefly through mediating representations, the portrait, the letter, or the word game (27). That those devices do not guarantee a felicitous connection between creator and consumer has confirmed for some critics Austen's place as a proto-linguistic philosopher, someone whose fiction dramatizes the misunderstandings and misplaced intentions that define so much human interaction.[21] But it may also show her to be an early theorist of screen-based media and the bonds we form through them.



The portrait scene in *Emma* casts the heroine in the role of media creator/director *and* celebrity: Emma stages and creates the picture of her friend, Harriet, but Emma is also the object of fascination for Mr. Elton, who looms over her. Many visualizations of this moment—including Brock's illustrations, as well as Heckerling and De Wilde's films—capture this triangulation of sentiment through the visual object.



Despite Emma's mediocre representation, in all of these examples we see the media form of, perhaps, what Claudia Johnson calls the novel's "positive versions of female power," as Emma is responsible for the production, not just exhibition, of desirable images (404).

In her 2015 study on the affective connections that people make with their books, Deidre Lynch claims that the

“emergence of fictional literature bec[ame] available to readers first and foremost as private, passionate persons, rather than as members of a rational, civic-minded public.”[22]

Austen appears in Lynch’s argument as a central figure, someone whose characters (and whose own reading habits) reveal books to be personal, therapeutic items, quiet friends with whom one commiserates on the regular. However, as our moment makes all too clear, Austen additionally uncovers the social necessity of a whole range of silent media objects—from images, still or sequential, to virtual applications, those *techné* that may come to characterize adaptations of her novels in the twenty-first century. In so doing, Austen registers the intimacy that audiences continue to feel for mass cultural phenomena. Her novels inculcate “passable empathy for others,” even as objects of pop culture allure.[23] As my afternoon escape to De Wilde’s *Emma*. confirms, our ardent dedication to the Austen industry continues to be one of the best illustrations of that modern experience. But, at times like these, the novelist also accounts for the vital and very public infrastructure built on these mediating platforms, the avatars and images that produce a world at a distance, in whose light we have all attempted to remain close.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Christopher Rojeck, *Presumed Intimacy: Parasocial Interaction in Media, Society and Celebrity Culture* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015), 1-22. Rojeck calls parasocial interactions “relationships of presumed intimacy between media figures and network spectators” (13). In light of the massive expansion of communication technology in the 2000s, Rojeck expands the idea beyond its original purview, where “ordinary people” merely identified with “the lives of the famous and the glamorous” (16). See also Elizabeth M. Perse and Rebecca B. Rubin, “Attribution in Social and Parasocial Relationships,” *Communication Research* 16.1 (February 1989): 59-77; David Giles, “Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research,” *Media Psychology* 4.3 (August 2002): 279-305.

Mass media parasociality is more often affiliated with television, its regular, serialized medium providing viewers better opportunity to build relationships with representations. See, for example, Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A., “Loneliness, Para-Social interaction, and Local Television News Viewing,” *Human Communication Research* 12.2 (...1985): 155–180; Edward Schiappa, Mike Allen, and Peter Gregg, “Parasocial Relationships and Television: A Meta-Analysis of the Effects,” In *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances Through Meta-Analysis*, Raymond W. Preiss, Barbara Mae Gayle, Nancy Burrell, Mike Allen, and Jennings Bryant (eds) (London: Routledge, 2007): 301–314. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. All citations of Austen’s novels derive from Jane Austen, *Emma* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2000); *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2001).

3. See John L. Sullivan, *Media Audiences: Effects, Users, Institutions, and Power* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications), 231-2.

4. Taylor-Joy is quoted in Vincent Dowd, “Why Austen’s Emma would be ‘queen of social media,’” *BBC News* (February 14, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-51458345>.

5. Ibid.

6. *Clueless*, directed by Amy Heckerling (1995; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures).

7. *Northanger Abbey*, directed by Jon Jones (2007; London, UK: ITV Studios).

8. There is an ongoing debate as to whether true parasocial exchanges can include instances with a likelihood of reciprocation (in which case, some researchers say, the interaction is not really parasocial, merely “distanced”). However, with the current dominance of social media—and the way it can license regular communications between celebrities and their fans through comments and recorded messages—the lines here are blurry. Rojeck notes that this uncertainty

about the protocol for reciprocal exchanges is a paradigmatic condition of late liberal society:

“Consecutive to the autonomy to act however I please, so long as it does not damage the interests and wellbeing of others, is now a freedom to record the intention of others to communicate with me without my taking any action whatsoever to reciprocate” (8).

9. For the distinct sociality of fan culture, see Andy Ruddock, *Understanding Audiences: Theory and Method* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications), 155-6. For the “presumed intimacy” of people towards “empty apparitions,” see Rojeck 1-3.

10. Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

11. Beyond Habermas’s classic definition, for consideration of the “enlightened” public sphere as a circulating media environment, see Clifford Siskin and William Warner (eds.), *This is Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), esp. 1-36. On the social and political differentiation between the audience as “crowd” or the audience as “people,” see Sullivan 14.

12. See Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). In her study of the reading audiences of romance novels, Radway claims that readers of Austen participated in a similar act of solitary consumption to the novelist’s characters—because the novels were difficult, contemporary women readers “could read her only...if they were alone” (197).

13. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 2012), 46-54.

14. *Pride and Prejudice*, directed by Joe Wright (2005; Paris: StudioCanal).
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15. *Pride and Prejudice*, directed by Simon Langton (1995; London, UK: BBC1). Caption citation from Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, “Slipping into the Ha-Ha”: Bawdy Humor and Body Politics in Jane Austen’s Novels,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 55.3 (December 2000): 309-39.

16. *Riverdale*, created by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa (2017-; Los Angeles, CA: Warner Bros. Television); *American Vandal*, created by Dan Perrault and Tony Yacenda (2017-8; Los Gatos, CA: Netflix); *On My Block*, created by Lauren Lungerich, Eddie Gonzalez, and Jeremy Haft (2018-; Los Gatos, CA: Netflix).

17. See Stephanie Russo, “Austen Approved: Pemberley Digital and the Transmedia Commodification of Jane Austen,” *Women’s Writing* 25.4 (August 2018): 512-24; Misty Krueger, “Handles, Hashtags, and Austen Social Media,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 61.4 (Winter 2019), 378-96; Alexandra Samuel, “Is Jane Austen the Antidote to Social Media Overload?” *JSTOR Daily* (January 21, 2020), <https://daily.jstor.org/is-jane-austen-the-antidote-to-social-media-overload/>. For a discussion of “The Republic of Pemberley,” one of the original Austen community websites, see Judy Simons, “Jane Austen and Popular Culture,” *A Companion to Jane Austen*, eds. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 471-2.

18. Ruddock 8.

19. On the relationship between Austen and Regency-era visual culture, see Jeffrey Nigro, “Visualizing Jane Austen and Jane Austen Visualizing,” *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal Online* 29.1 (Winter 2008),

<http://jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol29no1/nigro.html?>; "Reading Portraits at Pemberley," *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal Online* 34.1 (Winter 2013), <http://jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol34no1/nigro.html?>. For the subsequent depictions of Austen and her novels, see Devoney Looser's initial section "Jane Austen, Illustrated" in her *The Making of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2017), 13-74.

20. Caption citation from Claudia L. Johnson, "Emma: 'Woman, Lovely Woman, Reigns Alone,'" in *Emma*, ed. Stephen M. Parrish (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2000): 400-13.

21. For the relationship between Austen and linguistic philosophy (especially pragmatics and "felicitous" communication), see Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005), 111-91; Candace Nolan-Grant, "Jane Austen's Speech Acts and Language-Based Societies," *S.E.L.* 49.4 (Autumn 2009): 863-78; Eric Lindstrom, "Austen and Austin," *European Romantic Review* 22.4 (July 2011): 501-20.

22. Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 6-7.

23. Rojeck 2.





In *Abjection (In)Corporated*, the editors propose to tackle this rethinking of the concept from a political viewpoint.

The unbearable monstrosity of bodies

by [Éric Falardeau](#)

Review of *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence*, eds. Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

I would like to begin with an autobiographical note. I was very eager to read this book since it seemed to apply directly to my own work. As both a researcher and an artist myself, the book indeed spoke to me personally in term of my own creative work which strongly focus on horror and sexuality. My current research examines representations of the male body in online pornographic audiovisual production, and I wrote a book on gore, pornography, and bodily fluids. In addition, the concept of abjection has helped me as a filmmaker to find aesthetic ways to express myself and create affect. In my first feature *Thanatomorphose* (2012) I have relied on our western perception of the body and its productions (fluids, etc.) to create a feeling of unease and disgust by insisting on textures (visual, sounds). Thinking about the abject helped me find original ways to depict horrific or sexual situations.

The concept of abjection has a profound impact and influence on Western thought. According to Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva, it is

“not the lack of cleanliness or health that makes abject, but what disrupts an identity, a system, an order. What does not respect the limits, places, rules” (1980, pp. 11-12).

It is the absence of definition, this erasing of border, this flaw in the common “language” which constitute for Kristeva the core of abjection,

“an outside like the inside, made of pleasure and pain. Unnamable would therefore be the indistinctiveness of inside and outside, a limit that can be crossed in both directions by pleasure and pain” (p. 76).

This uncertain space between the Self and the Other can cause a variety of affective responses, from disgust to pain, enjoyment to fascination. The fluidity of limits allows for one’s participation in the abject. The borders between inside and outside, subjective and objective, matter and spirit, cease to exist.

Therefore, how can abjection help us understand our past and current mediatic landscape? *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence* gathers essays from scholars to give insights on this complex topic from a political viewpoint rather than the usual psychoanalysis or modernist stances inherited from post-structuralist theorists. That is, the authors aim to look at the concept not only as a process that separates one from what “is not him or her,”

but more as social critical theory where this idea is applied to study marginalized groups, either economically, sexually, or racially.

In an unique way, *Abjection Incorporated* makes a compelling argument about the concept of abjection as a useful tool to understand our peculiar existences in a sensory and irrational way. The book is divided into three sections—performances, bodies, and aesthetics—since its goal

“points to a multivalent understanding of abjection as a social, political, and aesthetic operation designed to separate those who *are* or *should be* from those who *are not* or *should never be*, and more recently to provide perverse cover of those who feel their own sovereign subjectivity suddenly threatened by the mere acknowledgment of the Other” (p. 27).

The essays explore this idea of abjection by conjuring seemingly eclectic subjects like EC Comics’ horror stories, Amy Schumer, South Korean Film Comedy, Japanese’s manga, Louis C.K., and talking dolls.



A frame from the web series *Awkward Black Girl* (S02 EP01, “The Sleepover”, 2012). The comedy comes from the “other” being both feminine and racialized.

Being “cast out,” either symbolically or literally, enables empowerment and criticism. Rebecca Wanzo’s chapter “Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics” perfectly synthesizes this idea about the power of abjection. The paradoxes that arise in the complex relations uniting identification and alienation when confronted to the “other” also enable social and political criticism. The author proves her point by looking at how both actors use black humor and discomfoting situations to laugh at African American women and white women’s limited horizons. Despite sharing a common identity as “women,” by producing laughter in peculiar contexts, often sexualized, they also reveal the racial issues inherited from the past. In her analysis of *Girls* (Dunham) and *Awkward Black Girl* (Rae), Wanzo notes:

“The precarious-girl comedy makes endless alienation a source of humor and evolves from comedic traditions that use abjection and what Kathleen Rowe calls the ‘unruly woman’ to disavow the possibility of solidarity with people of similar historical identities and social locations, embracing the otherness found in abjection as a

desired end and expression of an authentic self” (p. 56-66).



The two actors doing sketches in the satirical *The Unfinished Comedy* (Lü Ban, 1957) which criticizes the Communist Party's politics.

These marks obviously overflow into more delicate fields of representations. Yiman Wang's chapter "The Animal and the Animalistic: China's Late 1950s Socialist Satirical Comedy" and Rijuta Mehta's essay "Anticolonial Folly and the Reversals of Repatriation" about colonialism in South Asia delve into these complex issues. Both explore the notion of "otherness" by looking at how artists object to their peculiar country's power dynamics by "abjectifying" specific bodies, species, races, social classes, or minorities. They find that this tactic can be a powerful tool for questioning, change, and freedom. For Wang, slapstick and bodily humor in films like the notorious *The Unfinished Comedy* (Lü Ban, 1957), where two comedians play sketches for Communist Party officials and censors. These sketches expose

"the purist ideologues [that] equated bodily humor with an abject animalism ineligible for socialist hospitality – only to end up making it constitutive of the very foundation of the socialist body politic" (p. 121).

How the authorities reacted badly, to say the least, to these films is a key to understanding Chinese socialist cinema and politics.

Taking another perspective on political oppression, Mehta stresses out that "abjection is comedy's difference from itself rather than its opposite" (p. 143). Thus, it can be an important tool for anticolonialism discourses. By looking at the aftermath of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 through Saadat Hasan Manto's shorts stories and archival photographs of incapacitated women in camps, she makes an argument

"for the ever-renewed and incalculable mediation between irony and abjection, such that abjection might lead to some sort of freedom or it might misfire, but it has no more certain purchase on a new and true freedom than mastery does" (p. 161).



A panel from "Reflections of the Death" illustrated by Al Feldstein for the issue #23 of *Tales from the Crypt* (April 1951, EC Comics). Thee body literally "oozes" at the reader.

Horror and violence also other ways to challenge the established order by taking pleasure in indulging in disgusting imagery and attitudes. Writing about the explicit drawings published from 1940s through the mid-950s by American EC Comics, known for their infamous series, notably *Tales from The Crypt* and *The Vault of Horror*, Nicholas Sammond's "A Matter of Fluids: EC Comics and the Vernacular Abject" follows Kristeva. Objecting to conscious and unconscious, private and social control mechanisms, he reminds us that

"by naming the self in relation to hat which it casts off—shit, piss, snot, menses, and so on—then dwelling on the abject (rather than disavowing it) provided an avenue toward rejecting an ideal self-produced by a seemingly corrupt symbolic order" (p. 228).

Inside and outside are impossible to distinguish one from another in the abject. And it is this uncertainty, this inability to distinguish, that elicits a feeling of anguish and horror, disgusting or pleasurable, brought forth by the rotting corpses founds in EC's colorful panels.

In a more socially oriented analysis of abjection as a part of visual imagery, Eugenie Brinkema analyzes photographer and filmmaker Larry Clark's oeuvre (*Kids, Bully, The Smell of Us*). In "Spit * Light * Spunk: Larry Clark, an Aesthetic of Frankness," Brinkema argues

"for abjection's notion of downcasting, lowering, and casting off to describe a formal language of uncluttered openness, sincerity simplification and clarification, a brutalizing of visual language by paring down to a radical program of exclusion" (p. 248).



Bodily fluids can be both exciting and repulsive

Following the author, we might add that by insisting in a quasi-documentary

as in that scene from *The Smell of Us* (Larry Clark, 2014).

manner on actors' bodies, often photographed or filmed together during sexual acts, Clark appeals to the haptic function of the gaze, namely this property that allows identification with bodies and sensations projected on screen. The result is what Brinkema calls an aesthetic of frankness, a positive space where the body bears the "*risk of truth*" (p. 263) rather than simply being an undetermined territory, and in this way Clark up new spaces for performance and agency.

Our relation to representations is also informed by the processes leading us to incorporate—literally to "form into a body," to embody—abjection. In an essay in this anthology entitled "Why, an Abject Art," visual artist Mark Mulroney recalls his childhood and traumatic sexual education, provided by his passage in a Catholic school and his reading of *What's Happening to Me?*, an illustrated guide to puberty given to him by his parents. How does a kid or a teenager going through puberty escape sexual shamefulness when nothing is said but everything is bad? Mulroney mixes text and drawings to reveal the inherent tension between curiosity, desire, and prohibited acts within our Western culture, characterized by its Judeo-Christian imagination imbued with Cartesian philosophy and body-mind dualism. Corporality is seemingly ignored while being condemned as the source of all sins. This fact in many people's lives contributes their internalizing more or less consciously the affective results of abjection.

THE SECOND IMAGE IN THE BOOK THAT I FOUND VERY DISTURBING SHOWED TWO BOYS IN THE SHOWER LOOKING AT EACH OTHER'S PENISES. THE CAPTION READ, "THE GENTLEMAN ON THE LEFT IS CIRCUMCISED, HIS FRIEND ISN'T."



I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT "CIRCUMCISED" MEANT AND I DIDN'T NOTICE THAT THEIR PENISES LOOKED DIFFERENT, SO THIS LEFT ME WONDERING: WHAT IS CIRCUMCISION? WHY ARE THESE BOYS SHOWERING TOGETHER? IS IT REALLY OK TO LOOK AT ANOTHER BOY'S PENIS? AND WHAT ROLE DOES THAT GIANT WHISTLING SPERM PLAY IN THIS WHOLE NAKED, STARING-AT-EACH-OTHER-IN-THE-SHOWER SCENE? MY EIGHT-YEAR-OLD IMAGINATION BEGAN TO STITCH TOGETHER A NARRATIVE THAT WOULD HELP ME MAKE SENSE OF THIS BOOK THAT MY MOTHER AND FATHER HAD GIVEN TO ME WITHOUT ANY EXPLANATION.

An extract from Mark Mulroney's visual essay in which he recalls his traumatic sexual education in a Catholic school.

Thus, sexuality is another territory to be deconstructed. The abject nature associated with it by the institutions of power, whether political or religious, must be fully embraced. This positive transgression of moral, ethical, and legal rules is the core of eroticism, for example, for thinkers such as Georges Bataille (1957), who also theorized abjection and whom the editors cite extensively in their introduction.

Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence strongly advocates for a more nuanced perspective than the usual post-structuralist binary

opposition of pleasure and violence depending on the subject or object position. As Hennefeld and Sammond summarize,

“The effects of this abjection are very really, though they often unfold in images and events that seem altogether unreal. Laugh, cry, gawk, quake, shudder, or freeze in terror—these encroaching imperatives of abjection can and should continue to produce renewed energies for collective refusal and resistance: for saying ‘no’ instead of always insisting ‘not I.’ The abject objection demands more of us than quietude, acquiescence, and incorporation. It is a challenge, asking us who the hell we think we are” (p. 27).

In a world saturated with images and discourses, abjection might offer a sensory alternative to experience and apprehend our existence. It is perhaps one of the rare uncontrolled and disturbing—therefore powerful—emotion one can feel, allowing us maybe even just for a brief moment to fully inhabit ourselves and the world around us.

Coming back to what I’ve mention in the introduction to this review, as a filmmaker myself, I’ve been especially interested in how cinema uses the abject. The “politics of pleasure and violence” are particularly obvious in all the texts dealing with comedy, which constitute about a third of the essays in this anthology. A lot of artists working in this field like to infringe upon social conventions and use taboos to illicit laughter in their audience. Parody, satire, and irony, for example, involve a set of tropes to reverse, subvert, and criticize social institutions, situations or behaviors. Considering these tropes in filmmaking reminds me a lot about the proximity between abjection and the grotesque, an aesthetic that “we associate with the tragic and the anguish and at the same time with the farce and the laughter of the carnival” (Iehl, 1997, p. 3). Such a closeness reveals how abjection can be a positive force to reckon and reclaim. And there is a long history to this kind of narrative work. For example, the social critique and the role reversal specific to what French theorists name the “carnavalesque,” a term coined to describe some grotesque paintings like the iconic *Le combat de Carnaval et Carême* by Bruegel the Elder, are perceptible now in the work of contemporary comedians.

I’ve previously suggested in my book *Le corps souillé: gore, pornographie et fluides corporels* [which can be roughly translated as *The Tainted Body: Gore, Pornography, and Bodily Fluids*] that even if abjection is an affective state, it is also a particular way to “mettre en scene”: that is, to “frame” or “stage” bodies.



A promotional still from *Thanatomorphose* (Éric Falardeau, 2012) in which a woman is slowly rotting away.

I am exploring the notion of abjection in an existential manner as an ontological condition of the self.



A scene from *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1984). One of the filmmaker's obsessions is the erasing of the borders between inside and outside, subjective and objective, matter and spirit, through mass media.

Visual arts—photography, painting, comics, literature, or film—try to identify, explore, and question the notion of “body.” To “stage” or ignore it is always risking revealing its monstrous and abject potential. For example, David Cronenberg's cinema, like a good part of *gore* cinema, has a troubled relation with the notion of abjection. Cronenberg's *mise en scene* and narratives rely heavily on the idea of metamorphosis. The abject appears in a kind of metamorphosis that serves to expose the invisible. In his films, the body is no longer a barrier between the visible and the invisible; it conceals an off-screen space, that is, the interior of the body. Whether it is Rose in *Rabid* (1977), Seth Brundle in *The Fly* (1986), Max Renn in *Videodrome* (1983) or James Ballard in *Crash* (1996), the Cronenbergian characters all go through a physical transformation and then, as a consequence, a psychological one. The plots and the visuals set up an opposition between the visceral and the intellectual. The body becomes the Other and possesses the self. The mind gets enslaved by the body and its disturbances. The regular order disappears. As a character screams in *Videodrome*: “Long live the new flesh.”



A panel from famous manga artist Junji Ito's *Shiver* (2015). Another example of the use of "abjection" and the "grotesque" to elicit specific affects in the reader.

Sexuality, like horror, raises unique problematics when thinking about abjection. Most obviously, film and photography allow for the spectacular exhibitionism of private parts and bodily fluids. Their exhibition, fetishized by the close-up, acts as a revealer of the ambiguous relation that viewers, spectators or their cinematographic doubles (the characters with whom they identify or not), maintain with their carnal envelope. Objects of disgust and fascination, they are the expression of an existential angst that sex insidiously forces us to confront. An emphasis on fluids with the help of close-up sound and visuals directly summons the viewer's touch due to the very texture of said fluids: half-liquid, half-solid, sticky, messy, tasty. Whether fluids are glorified in the act of sex (pornography) or disgusting and frightening in the horror of death (horror), they appeal to our own bodily experience.

By insisting with close-ups on bodies, reducing them to their simplest expression, reducing them to a banal malleable envelope made of fluids and flesh, creators expose consciously or not the monstrosity of our condition. The close-up offers a new perspective; it reveals details and intrinsic qualities previously ignored. It goes where the eye has never gone or lingered. Due to its emphasis on the object, it reveals what the eye has ignored. The object saturates the space and occupies all our attention. The close-up does more than just show an object, a substance, a part of the body, it also reveals its texture given the proximity of the camera. What is finally revealed through close-up is the monstrosity of the bodies: the skin, its movements and its roughness, but also its fluids. The shiny, wet and damp bodies take on an abstract dimension, their limits are indeterminate, they are hidden from view. Indeterminacy, both moral and physical, is the very nature of abjection.



Charles Burns' *Black Hole* (1995-2005) graphically explores teenage angst by having a sexually transmitted disease modify the bodies of promiscuous adolescents.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Indiana University, where the *Jump Cut* editors were graduate students in Comparative Literature together.



A radical film journal that was a predecessor to *Jump Cut*.

The history of *Jump Cut*: 2013 interview with Julia Lesage and Chuck Kleinhans

by [Rox Samer](#)

Eugene, OR, July 2013. Conducted as a part of Rox Samer's dissertation research. Transcribed and edited by Julia Lesage, May 2020.

Rox: I've got a lot of questions. I'd like to start by getting the *Jump Cut* origins story.

Chuck: Julia and I and John Hess and John's then-wife, Judith Hess, met in graduate school in Comparative Literature at Indiana University. Julia, John and Judy were all interested in film. I was working in a related area with my dissertation on theater and drama. Toward the end of our stay in Bloomington, we thought about starting our publication. Although John had published at least one article in *Film Quarterly*, he felt he hadn't been able to be as radical as he wanted. Julia had written a couple of things for *Cineaste*, which was gratifying. But at the same time as that journal was interested in a more activist perspective and good in covering international film, the editors were also skeptical about semiotics and theoretical approaches. Also, Julia had been involved with *Women and Film* but they covered a specific topic area and weren't open to doing other things. So, given the array of what was out there at the time, we thought that it appropriate to start another film publication.

In terms of experience, we knew about inexpensive offset printing and what you could do in a tabloid format. I had worked on the Underground Press throughout graduate school, and I had a publication and graphics background before that from high school journalism. Julia had been involved in one of the underground papers in Bloomington.

Julia: Tabloid printing produces something like a grocery store flyer. It's really the bargain basement of printing, and in the 70s it was flourishing. The Underground Press used offset tabloid printing because it was relatively inexpensive and let alternative publication flourish in the late 60s early 70s as a vibrant movement. That was what we turned to. But as a result of our use of tabloid paper, in the early history of *Jump Cut*, it wasn't esteemed as a publication. To counter that and to make the issues more durable, we finally upgraded to photo offset paper for a while. Then we went back to having a sturdy glossy cover but with tabloid pages on the inside. All of those production decisions expose a really interesting aspect of printing and prestige.

We were all opposed to the Vietnam War and active in the early antiwar movement. I was active in the early Women's Liberation movement, which had



A feminist film journal, on tabloid paper, that was a predecessor to *Jump Cut*. Its full run is on the *Jump Cut* web site.

<https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/WomenAndFilm/index.html>



Tabloid printing was a major outlet for '70s counterculture.

had an important early beginning in the Midwest before I arrived in Bloomington. One of the women from Chicago who had been a founder of Women's Liberation there, Marlene Dixon, visited Bloomington, after which the local women formed different activist organizations. These women were socialists, which meant that Women's Liberation there had a socialist feminist orientation more than anything else.

C: These women decided that their most important project should be abortion counseling, and so they provided that as a service. Essentially a group of the most activist women lived in a house together and for 24/7 they'd answer the phone to counsel women who needed abortions. This was before Roe v Wade. The basic solution was to fly someone to the East Coast where they could get abortion services in New York. That also meant coming up with the money to pay for the flight and for the abortion itself. Usually women faculty or women in the community would put up money to subsidize this.

In addition, there was a politically progressive group of dealers who tithed their marijuana. Out of each bag they sold, they would add a two-dollar surcharge that went to the woman's abortion fund, from which these guys actually were the direct beneficiaries. They'd gotten enough women pregnant! It was in their interest.

J: Among the early ideas we had for *Jump Cut*, in addition to radical film making, we wanted to cover political documentaries and international cinema and a new kind of film was being made in the United States, for example, *Sugarland Express*.

C: In the 70s Hollywood, there was a breakdown of official norms. You know, with the 70s maverick Hollywood directors. At that time anyway, it was Scorsese, even Spielberg, people like that.

Another person who was on the editorial board or and wrote for us was Bill Van Wert. He wasn't one of the founders of *Jump Cut* but he was close to us. He'd been at Indiana and then he went to Temple, so he was part of it.

As we started in Chicago, we gathered around us some people who were volunteers. We ended up calling ourselves a collective, which meant on Saturdays we'd get together at our house. People would read manuscripts and evaluate them, work on the physical parts of layout, and have a meal together. The meetings became a gathering spot. A similar thing started on the West Coast.

Judy Hess was teaching at Sonoma State and Julia got a job at the University of Illinois at Chicago. So, John and I were both trailing spouses. Out there John and Judy split up after about six months. After his divorce, John moved down to the Bay Area and as an ABD started teaching at San Francisco State. I had a PhD but no academic job. I was doing fundraising for a community organization and driving a school bus and did some other odd jobs. Because we lived off a really bare bones budget, tabloid is what we could do. At the same time, we were inspired by thinking that we really wanted to put out our own product and initiate the kind of project that could be sustained.

In fact, the Movement that we had experienced in the 60s was one based around this cycle: "It's fall. In September you have to start organizing." Then there's a big march in May against the war. Then everything dies over the summer and you have to start all over again. Having gone through that in terms of the anti-war



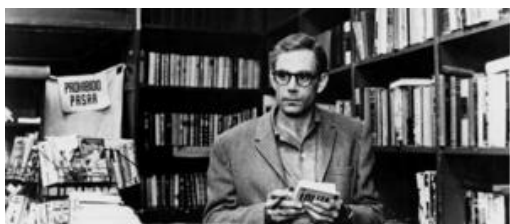
Films that seem to breathe new life into Hollywood were important to the editors when they founded *Jump Cut*.



Chuck reviewed [Wanda](#) (dir. Barbara Loden) in the first issue of *Jump Cut*.



Judith and John Hess reviewed [Reed: Insurgent Mexico](#) (dir. Paul Leduc) in issue 1.



Julia reviewed [Memories of Underdevelopment](#) (dir. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea) in issue 1.

movement and in terms of the student movement, I think we were looking for something more long-term. We wanted to create a political project that was also intellectually challenging and would call on our own skill sets and talents and interests.

J: And we wanted to introduce new ideas.

C: Yes. There was always a teacherly aspect to our project. John had been involved in the East Bay Socialist School, where he taught courses like basic Marxism. People would gather there; they'd show up and then have a class together. But the school would also have music and lots of other events going on during the week. So, it was also a gathering place for leftists. In terms of starting a *Jump Cut* group, John had made a lot of contacts and may have actually taught a course on third world film there. Through that, he gathered some people around him who then said, "We'd like to work on *Jump Cut*."

Logistically our editorial process was an ungainly thing. By that, I mean starting a new publication with editors in two distant places across the country at a time when phone calls were so expensive. We did an enormous amount of work by writing letters back and forth. Eventually phones got cheaper and we could do more by phone, then by Internet. But that wasn't until much later.

J: We finally hired a typist rather than having to type all the manuscripts ourselves. But we did all the layout. And then we ran into a problem. Later, I always asked people who were going to found a magazine about it. I'd say, "What are you going to do about the storage problem?" And by that, I mean that after a printers' run, you have many issues left over. As these stacks of back issues accumulate in your apartments and garage and Chuck's mom's garage and the back porch where we lived, it becomes a huge problem. One of the great advantages of going digital is not to have so much physical stuff. We became burdened with too many back issues everywhere.

R: How many copies were you publishing for an issue?

J: I can't remember.

C: When we started, the press run was about 2,000. Eventually it got up to five or six thousand. Then we would have to ship copies out to the West Coast. John would take them around and put them in bookstores. We'd shift some to New York where Peter Biskind would put *Jump Cut* in New York City bookstores. But the process was complicated because you'd get something printed, and then you have to bundle it up and send it to the subscribers, and then you also have to send it to bookstores.

At that time bookstore distribution was different. There were a lot more alternative small book stores and film venues that would consider carrying *Jump Cut*. And some British bookstores wanted to carry it, but the postal process was complicated. Sure, we had an international perspective. But it was almost impossible to get issues abroad to people. Especially in Latin America or Africa. Subscribers or bookstores would have to get U.S. dollars, difficult to obtain in many countries. They'd then have to send the money to us. We then have to send issues out first through U.S. mail and then through their mail system. So the shipment had to go through two different mail systems, and then maybe it'd get to them and maybe it wouldn't but how would we ever know? We tried. Obviously if somebody wrote us from like Poland, we would send them a copy and but we wouldn't know if they got it. I mean we would even send them a subscription for years, but never quite know what happened to it.



Chuck in Bloomington.



John in Bloomington.



Julia early 70s. Chicago.

On the other hand, sometimes we'd get these incredible stories. Once, after the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, a Iranian student came and told me, "Oh, you know, I've been I've been reading *Jump Cut*. In fact, I translated some articles into Farsi and we would distribute them in mimeograph form at the film school, articles on third world film."

R: Did you have a better sense of its readership in English-speaking countries? Like in the UK or Australia?

C: Only the efforts that we made toward distribution, not anything more about what the spread or effect was. It was hard to communicate about that. We might meet people who read *Jump Cut* and would tell us that, but nothing more. Also, we knew some of the people in England. We had both been to the *Screen* summer school, and we knew Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey and Jeffrey Nowell Smith because they had taught in the United States. We'd met different people who knew about *Jump Cut*, and we would send them copies, so they probably passed the paper on or told other people.

R: A few years into *Jump Cut*, how did you see it fitting into feminist film discourse, especially of *Camera Obscura* or *Screen* or any conversations between various groups.

J: I would say the women who were interested in introducing feminist ideas into film studies, and even into filmmaking, were all close. There weren't a lot of us, plus there was a pioneering person who hasn't been given enough credit. She's an art history teacher, T. Kaori Kitao. Now that person came to a women's meeting at Society for Cinema Studies at the time many years ago, maybe 30 years ago. She said that she was a transsexual, asked if she could join the meeting, and all of the women quickly accepted her. That's never been recognized as a really important moment in film studies, nor has T. Kaori Kitao been recognized as an important academic transsexual. She was certainly by far the first trans person I know who presented herself as a woman and asked to be accepted and was. That was around the time of the Milwaukee conferences, early 80s late 70s. She published in art history publications and was a relatively well-known art historian. I would say in film studies, feminists had different theoretical perspectives, but professionally they felt a huge amount of solidarity.

C: I think there were some differences, too. When we started *Jump Cut* we were always committed to feminism, but of course *Women and Film* already existed. As you know, Julia was on their editorial board and I was asked later to be on their editorial board. Their editors ended up having differences with the women that subsequently formed *Camera Obscura*. We knew all the women in *Camera Obscura*, and we even had a discussion with some of them at a certain point when they said, we're leaving *Women in Film* and we're interested in maybe being involved with *Jump Cut*. We came to an understanding that it was probably better for them to form their own publication. We're all friendly, we all knew each other and respected each other.

Part of that was that those women who formed *Camera Obscura* were graduate students thinking in terms of academic theory. Most of them also all went abroad in the Paris Film Program, where they got to study with French scholars like Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour and Thierry Kuntzel. That was the big boost for film semiotics. Linda Williams was part of that program, as were Sandy Flitterman, Mimi White, Judith Mayne. A whole lot of people who became the first group of U.S. feminist academic film scholars had gone on that program.

The situation was a little bit different in the UK. The 70s women film scholars like Claire Johnston, Pam Cook, and Laura Mulvey had to fit into this strange



Chcuk and Julia. Bloomington.



Early trip to Cuba run by Tricontinental film.



John and Chuck in Chicago, wearing *Jump Cut* tee shirts.

borderline territory. Essentially those women were associated with guys who were powerful or well-placed, but the women didn't have any of the advantages that those guys had. They didn't have academic jobs or regular academic positions. So they often ended up being like secretaries or in some kind of subordinate job. Take Claire Johnson and Pam Cook. For a number of years, the only way that they could get any control to do anything with film was that they ran this side event at the Edinburgh Film Festival. By doing that, they would get a little bit of money, could do their own programming, and then have a little brochure to go with it. So they would program Jacques Tourneur features or Max Ophuls, or they would maybe put together a special program at the National Film Theater. They would get some resources. They might have some money but only a little bit. It was really voluntary work that gave them a way to develop something in terms of feminist criticism or their own interests. So in a certain way they were building up credentials, but they did it in this situation of precarity. It was a common occurrence that women couldn't get regular jobs in film, they were always in this subordinate position.

J: During this whole period of formation of film studies, people were loose with each other because academic film studies didn't exist in a distinct, formed way. We were coming up as the ones who would then remake the field or establish it. In SCS the women were self-conscious about developing feminist criticism. We often would be together on a panel on women and film or women's issues. And on these panels we were really aware that that we were developing new knowledge. I think we've seen a similar thing happen with gay and queer studies, although it may have moved a little faster with contemporary scholars. After a while, it becomes clear that this kind of knowledge benefits a lot more people than just those who are producing it. And so there's a take up of the outsiders' ideas within the discipline as a whole.

I've found that class issues have always been more stubborn for us to face and to deal with, both class in the academy and class as subject matter. And certainly the academy has dealt with race at an even slower pace. Françoise Pfaff, who wrote for *Jump Cut* on *Xala*, was the first black woman in SCS whom I knew.

C: I remember going to the Society for Cinema Studies in '83 in Madison, Wisconsin, and there was the first time that I ever saw a black person at SCS, Mark Reid, a grad student at the University of Iowa. And I met a black woman from the University of Wisconsin in Education. But that was the first time that I ever saw a person of color at SCS, including Asian people. It was just all this white-boys-club before that. I think Ana Lopez and Suzanna Pick were two of the few Latina/o members.

Also in the 70s, people forming film studies came from different disciplines and even professions. For example, Peter Wollen got this job teaching at Northwestern in the early 70s with an appointment split between English and Film. English decided that they really didn't want him around; film wasn't significant for them. So he had to go back to England. But while he was here for three years, Laura Mulvey was here too; they were married and had a child. But Laura was treated exclusively and only as a faculty wife—except in the city of Chicago at large, where she ran the first Chicago Women's Film Festival. Julia and I had met Peter and Laura in London. So we knew Laura as her own intellectual, someone who'd been writing in *Spare Rib*, the British feminist magazine. We thought of her as a



Chuck in 1970s at Northwestern University, next to the Speech Annex, where film was taught.

different individual from Peter, but then in the United States, she was never asked to teach a course. She was never asked for her opinion about anything. There would be events at Northwestern, and she would have to speak from the floor asking questions. She wasn't acknowledged as an intellectual. Peter and Laura's experiences in the United States were the sign of the kinds of way in which the contributions of people to film studies were off center and coming from these marginalized places.

The same thing happened with Ruby Rich. She went to Chicago and started working at the Film Center there. In her writing, Ruby is a powerful intellectual, but she's also someone who was in this position of being the co-director or assistant director at the Film Center. She could program things, bring people together, and get people to write programs notes. She would put together different things like that, but it was always in this kind of marginal way. It wasn't like being a professor with a regular salary, with benefits.

I mention these people's careers because those were also the kind of people who got involved in *Jump Cut*. Many were graduate students. For example, at that point Dana Polan was a graduate student at Santa Cruz and in the *Jump Cut* collective on the West Coast. Other people there were artists like Ernie Larson and Sherry Milner. Kathy Geritz, who now is the head of the Pacific Film Archive, was just an undergraduate at that point in the Bay Area. The same thing in Chicago. Some of the people involved in Chicago were grad students like Jane Gaines or Peter Steven or Russell Campbell, a grad student from New Zealand who was finishing up and was going back to New Zealand. Linda Williams came to Chicago and got involved. We were often a place that attracted people who were just getting started or didn't necessarily fit into an existing academic regime. At that point, even if you were hired by an English department and you're doing film, you were really a marginal person. Film was specialized knowledge.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from the 80s:



Chuck had that sweatshirt made up and liked to wear it to professional conferences.



He did a series of portraits of himself reading film theory books.



Chuck reading *Jump Cut*.

J: One of the things that's important to remember about women in film studies at that time is that almost none of the women scholars who were lesbians were out in print, almost none. And this was probably true of filmmakers. I remember once Barbara Hammer complaining bitterly that she had to take all the shit for being the only openly lesbian filmmaker that she knew. Although I was straight, I strongly felt and stated, for example, that if you offered a women's studies course and didn't offer a lesbian perspective, the course was incomplete. So it was important for me to address the reticence of feminist film scholars related to sexual expression. I think doing feminist criticism then was tricky enough, so the open discussion of gender and sexuality now indicates a real shift. For a lot of scholars now, theorizing gender is much more fluid.

There was another incident that happened about that time. It's related to this compartmentalization and how I found it problematic. The Lolita Raclan Rogers Feminist Film Conference, which we called the Feminar, was held at Northwestern in about '81 or so. Then a special issue of the *Film Reader*, a journal from Northwestern Radio TV Film Department, published the papers from that event. At the Feminar we held a discussion about pornography amongst the fifty or so women, which I tape recorded and had transcribed. In it, Lucy Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, who were in a consensual S&M relationship, also talked about lesbian sadomasochism. I wanted *Jump Cut* to print the whole discussion. And again there was opposition to it by some of the women on our editorial board. At the event, I had gotten permission from everyone there to publish this. So Chuck and I paid to have it printed at an instant print place. When we went to a couple of large conferences, an MLA and SCS, we distributed it maybe four or five thousand copies of this transcript.

I think it was important. At that time we didn't directly participate in the sex wars, but for Chuck and me those books were influential. For example, Pat Califia wrote a book, *Coming to Power*, which I bought and discussed with a women's group. Anyway, in my own writing it became really important for me to say something about the complexities of sexual identity and about the very idea of sexual oppression. I've said it in I don't know how many different ways, but as a basic idea in my writing, it's been massively ignored. That is, that as long as men have more social power than women, patriarchy is perpetuated by a masochistic sexuality on a woman's part. That's a structural part of the relationship. I don't know often I have written that; it's like the elephant in the living room. I've had dykes who tell me, "Oh, we always say that about straight women." But so few people acknowledge that as core to what I've written, it's extraordinary to me.

R: And one of the places that was written about was in the sex wars?

J: Yes. Part of the original discussion of lesbian sadomasochism was that these are structural parts of our sexuality. Within second wave feminism, it seems an unwelcome discussion. I don't think everybody wants to indulge in the theater which is sexual sadomasochistic sex practice. But I think masochism a structural part of woman's condition. Patriarchy wouldn't have gone on for so long if there weren't two sides to it. I mean it's pleasure, if there wasn't pleasure in that... it's not simple.

R: So you distributed the pamphlet relatively casually; it wasn't incorporated into *Jump Cut*?

J: It was just something I'd hand out or leave on seats or it was picked up on a literature table.

R: As a transcription of that conversation, do you still have copies? [J: It's on academia.edu.] But you didn't identify the speakers, did you?

C: When the name changes, the paragraph shift. Well, it was also about pornography too and about sexual images. It also influenced some of that early writing that we had in *Jump Cut* that you wrote about pornography. Gina Marchetti then wrote a piece surveying some of the literature on pornography. I think that's mainly been carried out because of your interest. [J: I don't pursue pornography as an intellectual interest in the way that you do.] No, but I think it's one of those areas where you're generating new knowledge. It's one of those things where you're trying over a period of time to expand a certain discussion. It's not always done easily or elegantly. And again the new ideas often reflect people who are much on the margins. If you're going to write about sexual images and if you go back and look at the sex wars discussions, the women who were artists were really carrying a lot of the burden. They were saying, "Well, I use the body in my art." People like Carolee Schneemann.

The larger point is that to develop an understanding of these areas, in fact, takes time. It also depends on experiences that you have and whether you put yourself forward in a way that's open to those experiences. For example, Julia ended up teaching at San Francisco State in '84. And that was just at the high point of the coming out of the whole Samois lesbian S&M group as an open movement.

J: And I tried to teach some pornography in a feminist criticism class and do it right. I set up a men's and women's section for viewing and discussing porn. In the women-only section, I showed a straight film and then I was going to show a gay male film. I showed *Boys in the Sand*, in which a close-up of an anus caused such a collective freakout that I had to stop the film and soothe feathers mid film, mid everything. For that class, that was the end of the women's pornography viewing.

C: The early stage of developing new knowledge around situations that have been especially stigmatized, ignored, or distorted depends on the work done by unusual people and on their circumstances and what they figure out to do. For example, in film studies in the United States, Julianne Burton was really the first scholar interested in Latin American cinema. Her process was unique. She once told me that in her first trip to Latin America, she went to about ten different countries where her whole trip consisted of arriving a place, asking who the filmmakers were, and getting their phone numbers—which was usually impossible in Latin America because there were no phone books. She was setting up a way of getting in touch with film people. So for a whole summer her research consisted of going from city to city and asking for this information. "Are there any filmmakers?" or "Someone else in this other place said that I should talk to you because you know about filmmakers."

A similar kind of unique contact with a special scholar happened when we published this piece in *Jump Cut* 10-11, which I think that Peter Biskind wrote. It was a buddy film which had a really sexist headline: "Thunderbolt and Lightfoot: Tightass and Cocksucker." Well, Tom Waugh, who was a grad student at the time, read it. He rushed us this letter saying, "I'm really mad that you're using this kind of derogatory language about gays," and much more. It was the first time that someone had written and said, "I'm a gay writer and I'm really mad about this," or even said anything like, "I'm a gay writer." So I immediately wrote back: "I understand exactly what you're saying. I can see the mistake that we made. Please would you write for something for us."



John Hess teaching at SF State.



John and Julia.



Cold Chicago winter.



On the porch with Sappho, before Julia got bad allergies.



Chuck and Tom Waugh.



Tom.

I think that what happens is this kind of process—from our knowing Tom, he got in touch with Richard Dyer. At that point, we knew of Richard's work because we had read about it elsewhere, but we didn't know Richard. Our correspondence eventually led to the gay special selection. So we also participated in one of those processes where alternative cultural institutions—like *Jump Cut*, *Camera Obscura*, *Women and Film*, or any of these outlier publications—function to let you form a network where you start to be in touch with all these different people.

This process happened with *Cineaste* editor Gary Crowdus. He worked with the first distributors of third world films, Tricontinental Film Distributors. He was a programmer, you know, and worked in their office as one of their main people. He had also had started *Cineaste* magazine when he was at NYU and just kept it going. Since he was interested in third world film, published lots about it. And so *Cineaste* was always strong in that way, but it also had this connection in that international filmmakers who came through New York would stop at Tricontinental. There they would see Gary, who would talk to them and then set up an interview that would run in *Cineaste*'s next issue. So much of this happens when you're forming a new area of knowledge. You depend on people making these connections and forming these networks. I think that this network formation is a really important aspect of it,

J: Gary was *Jump Cut*'s first subscriber.

R: It's apparent even just reading back through *Jump Cut*. Hearing these stories starts to flesh it out a bit more. You always reflect back on the process of production with the editorials. You do it in a way that's really unusual. It's forthcoming, with a transparency to it and to your own hiccups and mistakes in the past. This draws me most to *Jump Cut* of all the journals from back then.

Did you come to doing the gays and film special section out of that encounter with Tom Waugh?

C: We certainly were already familiar with gay and lesbian politics from people in the Movement. I'd been an organizer for a New Left organization called New University Conference and was on their staff for years. Within that, there was a gay and lesbian caucus, queer caucus. Through it, I got to know various people who were out, gay people who were political and active and involved in cultural work. One of the leading figures then was Charles Shively, a Boston-based man who wrote regularly for *Gay Community News*. He was a real activist, this was pre-Aids, an up-front, in-your-face kind of guy. I found the same mix among activists in Bloomington, when I was in Graduate School at Indiana University. There were only a few out gay people, but you ended up knowing them. It was all part of our culture, this Bohemian life.

Tom Waugh helped us a lot recruiting articles and getting work in *Jump Cut* on different perspectives and that continues to this day.

J: From the get-go, *Jump Cut* was interested in a plethora of issues. I eventually identified predominately as socialist feminist, and that position meant being anti-racist. Also, I was taking up class and gender and sexuality fairly early on.

R: So how did other than getting your friends together...was *Jump Cut* associated



Julia and Tom at his house in Montreal.



Visiting Tom Waugh: From left to right, Jacqueline Levitin, Tom, John Hess, Julia.



Julia and John.

with other organizations that you were working in at the time? How did you actively try to find people with different knowledges and experiences in particular fields? And how did you go about doing that? How did that core group go from like four or five to dozens or hundreds within a few years?

J: It happened very differently between print and electronic versions. While working in the print medium, we would often recruit authors. But, in fact, we wanted to cover areas that we were never successful in doing. For example, we wanted to have many more articles on independent documentary. We would often get a filmmaker to send out a video to a potential reviewer and never get the review back. It was such a common story. We would have a little more luck with book reviews. And then other times we would ask people to review specific feature films.

That's part of the economics of publishing. Assistant professors are probably going to be more eager to write something than any other group of people. So a lot of the people who wrote for us have been assistant professors. Now with digital publication, we get a lot more submissions from abroad, and we don't know most of our authors personally. Often we meet them at conferences after they published with us. So that's a different kind of relation to writers.

I want to go back and talk about commenting on our own process. There was a real difference from then and now. I laugh now but it wasn't so funny. When we founded *Jump Cut*, we were, like many leftists, impressed with the cultural revolution. And one of the aspects of the Chinese Cultural Revolution was the notion of criticism/self-criticism which we interpreted as this: you would have a meeting and then at the end you would say what could have been improved in terms of your process.

I laugh because the problem with criticism/ self-criticism is that nobody who's ever criticized takes it well. And they are probably likely to stop participating in the organization. So it's not exactly the ideal thing that we might have once thought it would be. It was useful in terms of process, in terms of people saying, "I don't know if I'm supposed to read five manuscripts and write a little bit about each one, or read one manuscript and really write a lot about that one." People could effectively talk about how they would proceed in the course of the working that one Saturday.

This spirit of evaluating process politically carried over to the idea that having transparency about your process as an institution is healthy. It helps the ongoing day-to-day work of the institution, and it helps other people who might want to found their institution. One of the early things that we decided was a good principle, and we've never changed our mind about it, was never to apply for grants. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, writing the grant application itself works as a form of self-censorship. You might say, "I'll just write the grant application, and then I'll do whatever I want." Right? When you write the grant application, you write an elaborate prose statement in which you say, "This is what the project is going to look like." In fact, writing that fucks your head up. After you write that statement, that's what your project looks like, and you've gone through a corrupting process.



Julia and JoAnn Elam. Chuck and Julia had a lifelong friendship with JoAnn and her husband Joe Hendrix. They worked in small gauge media and showed each other their work in frequent dinner gatherings.



JoAnn and Julia.



Julia video making with a tethered Canon VHS camera and portable VCR.

The second thing is that the grant is nice while you have it, but you've become used to the extra money, and you don't know what you have to do if you have to go back to living within your own needs. But if you only live within your own means, you know how to do that, and you know exactly what to do with your income. So from the first issue in 1974 through the end of the print publication, we each put in \$1,000 per issue—Chuck John and I. Now, it's cheaper. It's \$100 a month plus software that I have to buy for the computer. It probably is a thousand dollars total for the electronic issue.

I often tell independent media people, because I taught a lot of production classes, "You can tithe for your art. Once you're used to tithing for your art, you can do it for as long as you live." But I could say you can tithe for whatever you want to do, right? When we were selling print copies, we made more money, but we still each had to put in \$1,000 an issue.

C: That's by the time you take in the postage and shipping and personal stuff we put in as well. As we covered more of our expenses, we bought services, first a typist and then mailing services and things like that. So our expenses grew over a period of time. We would pay outside people to do more for us so that we would have more time, especially to do editorial work.

R: And were other folks at this time all applying for grants?

J: Yes, because they all printed on expensive paper. You just had to look at their paper to tell whether they had their own money or not, because they didn't get that much money coming in.

C: There're only a few routes available, like *Cineaste* does advertising that they get some income from. They also get some money from New York State Council on the Arts so they actually pay their writers, which is a good thing. They can get people who are trying to make a living as writers to contribute, whereas otherwise people who write for *Jump Cut* are just not going to get paid anything. Advertising is kind of limited and getting grants is also limited. You can make the money on sales, but now *Cineaste's* cover price is \$6 or \$7, I'm not sure, maybe \$10. If you get a subscription it's a lot cheaper. But the result is that very little of *Cineaste* is online. So you can't get it for free, unless you happen to be an academic whose library gets it and then you can look at the electronic version. This is restrictive.

What we consider one of the best things about *Jump Cut* today is that students anywhere in the world can see it for free. And they don't have to have access to a university library or some other system to do it. If they can get online, they can see it. And so that means our reach of speaking to people is just immense, and it's been positive for us.

R: When did you make the switch to online? And how did you go about archiving past issues?

C: It was at the end of the 90s. At first we thought of doing a dual thing where we would have an online version and also have a print issue, but it became obvious that online was the way to go. If people wanted a hard copy, they would be able to print out articles themselves. Julia did all the heavy lifting of putting the back issues online by scanning them and running them through optical character



John.



Tom.



Julia at Olympic National Park.

recognition, then proofreading all of the results and correcting it in Microsoft Word. It took her about five years to get all those back issues up.

J: Full time, all the time. It wasn't a mess, it was systematic. I might have done PDFs if it had been on 8.5" by 11" paper, but couldn't because *Jump Cut* was tabloid size. Optical character recognition really didn't have any PDF programs automated to do tabloid size. In fact, just to scan the tabloid size paper here at the University of Oregon into PDFs, I used a special 11" by 17" scanner in the geography library. And then I could put it through optical character recognition by breaking down each page into sections. However, OCR is not that precise, about 95% accurate. That means I had to do complete line-by-line proofreading in Word.

The result was beneficial for users. All the articles can be downloaded into Word or text. Somebody can have an essay on their computer and use it. In contrast, with the early PDFs you couldn't just lift the text off a page. You can now, programs are much more sophisticated, but then it meant that people could use that material in a lot of different ways. Now, for example, if people want to use an article in course packets and if they're making money off the course packet, then they go through Copyright Clearance. Otherwise, they can just download it themselves because we have a Creative Commons license. When I was doing that long term project, I didn't meet anybody else who was doing the same kind of work. I was doing this in an isolated, obsessive mode for a number of years, but it was well worth it after it was finished.

R: Are you guys able to monitor online traffic that comes to you?

C: We are. But some of it is a little crazy because searches on the web use something called a web crawler. So the most commonly sought-after items are a few pictures of *Donnie Darko*, jpegs.

You actually get—because the Internet is set up for retail marketing—an immense amount of data, much more data than you can use—of each day, or you can even get hour by hour breakdowns. It's fascinating the first time you look through it, and then after that you're thinking, "I don't need to check this variant." But as soon as a new issue comes, suddenly there's a huge boost. You can tell when students are working on term papers because suddenly certain articles are getting looked at a lot. You also get to see how long people spend on a page. You can see whether they're just glancing at it or whether they're actually keeping the window open for 20 minutes while they read it. So it's fascinating in terms of the amount of data that you can collect. Exactly what you do with it isn't clear. Retailers use that metadata to figure out whether they're going to sell more of the pink shoes or more of the blue shoes, but we don't have the same use for it.

But it is interesting in terms of being able to see that people all around the world read us. That's been a big nice thing. We discovered was that there are an incredible number of people reading *Jump Cut* in Asia, which was something we were never able to know before.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from the '90s:



Chuck and John in Berkeley, where John lived.



John.

To go back to what you asked about the group of people who came together around *Jump Cut*. Part of our interest was always—at least I was clear about this—that if we declared that we were interested in a subject, we would continue to be interested in it. There was a certain tendency for journals and magazines to push anything to do with a current topic, when there's a new phenomenon there, with, "We'll have the special issue on it." A lot of this kind of publishing happened in the 70s and early 80s around women in film. A journal would gather together a bunch of articles and then put out their women in film thing. Then they moved on. It wasn't like they kept publishing in that area; it was like, "Okay, we covered that. Now we're going to go on and do something else."

We felt that once we had declared that we were interested in something, we wanted to continue it. Part of that was functional. For example, we recruited articles about Cuba that comprised more than one issue; it ended up being four. But we've always remained interested in anything on Cuban Cinema. You declare an interest in a certain topic and you don't just feel like you've exhausted it with one thing. You just are always open to considering that area again or reflecting on it or wondering what's the next stage of discussing this issue. So I think that that's been an important principle, again as part of a developmental model rather than just a topical one.

R: It comes out of a genuine interest rather than a superficial one. If it seems like everyone's doing gays and cinema, "Let's do it now before we're behind." Your declaration of interest came out of a sustained rather than casual interest and was often a first formalized emergence of it.

J: But sometimes it's writers who get us interested in things. For example, we have an article coming up in this issue on Netflix. It's absolutely fascinating because it's about how at a certain juncture in media distribution, Netflix was able to step in and get such rapid expansion and take over streaming. That's interesting to me and I would love to see more about those kinds of economic moves, but it's also ok that it's something completely new. In other words, I myself just have gotten into the institutional and economic history of this aspect of film and television. Sometimes we get an article and I say, oh wow, and then I want more in that vein.

R: Did the lesbian special section come out of the gays and film section? Because right from the introduction of the gays and film special section, it seems you had already bracketed that we know we're going to do this?

C: Oh, that was clear. I think the only option that we had going into the original gay special section was that there might be something we could reprint. We couldn't find any lesbian criticism to run, and then someone said, "Well, what about this article? We could do a reprint of it." Then we'd made a decision: "No, we're going to generate our own essays." And so we did. It took us a while. Originally we thought all we'll put it in the next issue but we took a little bit longer to get things together.

J: I think because Chuck and Tom developed a relationship—and Tom had written this absolutely brilliant essay on gay male versus straight pornography, which is one of the best essays we've ever run in *Jump Cut*—that the gay male and film section had grown out of that relationship. I don't think there was any issue with



JC editors get together.



The Visible Evidence documentary conference became important to Julia and Chuck, here with Brian Winston.



Society for Cinema Studies conferences were always a good place to meet up with old friends, recruit writers, and get new ideas.

developing a separate lesbian and film section. It was just that the women said we want some time to develop some articles, that's all. And they took the time to do that. The one thing we all decided was the men were assigned to write the men's editorial, which I really love. In fact, I remember my friend, Jane Marcus, say after she read it: "This is groundbreaking: the men are demanding reparations for women."

Yes, I think it turned out well. Take Ruby's article. She spent a long time researching that piece. It's so well written, and it's been republished many times. The *Maedchen in Uniform* essay is canonical. You know, she corresponded with people in England. She did all this research and worked with German women on this. It's really quite amazing.

And Clare Whitaker had a piece in there, a groundbreaking interview. (She was Judy then and changed her name.) This piece has never really been recognized for documenting shifts in lesbian spectator positioning in watching feature film.

R: One of my questions was specific to that essay and set of interviews. Do you know how that developed?

J: She got her friends together.

R: But was it was a remarkably diverse set of friends.

C: Well, it was Chicago. It's not Eugene.

R: I know in some places you're explicit about the demographics of the who edited the particular issue. But did the team get more racially diverse, if not editorially, then in terms of the general regular contributors?

J: We had some people of color writing for us. Mark Reid came on the editorial board, and Manji Pendakur, an Indian, joined the editorial board, but no. I think the problem was the problem of many intellectual communities then, especially when you say you're going to be feminist and you're going to be open to queer ideas. Certainly that was my impression that time. Our gender discussions kept a lot of Black and Latino and Asian people from joining. Just saying those words—socialist feminist queer-friendly—acted as a filter, at least then.

C: Also, in a certain way it's also about what people of color say a lot. They are called on to be the token something or other in their institutions and the representative of their race. And as a field develops and there're so few people of color who are involved, we try to involve them. I mean we knew these people as graduate students—Ed Guerrero, Mark Reid—but when you run into people as friends and fellow scholars, many of them in a certain way are already engaged in other things.

I remember Charles Ramirez Berg at Texas talking clearly such a situation at various times: "Look, I'm the token Latino in my department. Therefore I get called on to be on all kinds of committees so they can say that there was diversity there. I get that more than other people." It's an administrative burden that he has to carry of being put on lots of committees, not for his brilliant ideas, but because of the color of his skin. He recognizes that and it's a career limiting thing. If you take that administrative work seriously, you are then put in the position of not having time to do your own scholarship. There are so many demands on people of color that other intellectual participation is constrained or it's restrained. It's a complicated thing. And for many scholars of color, it may not be the only topic that they're interested in pursuing—being representative of a particular ethnic or racial "other" identity.



Julia with fava beans.



Chuck loved cultivating roses.

About the only thing you can do in terms of getting a range of writers is just to constantly express that you're open to trying new things. You do it by making a point out of establishing connections with different groups and with different organizations, but you don't always get through to other people whom you might want to engage. I had an example of this at the last SCMS. There was a panel on Marlon Riggs's film, *Tongues Untied*. I didn't get to go to it because I was on another panel at that time. But I remember a friend, Patrick Johnson, later saying to me, "Why Chuck, I didn't know that you had written on Marlon." In fact, I had done the first interview with Marlon Riggs and wrote the first article on that film. I'd interviewed him less than a week after he first screened it. We printed both the article and the interview in *Jump Cut*. However, although Patrick and I had been colleagues at Northwestern for ten years, Patrick had never come across that article. So it was one of those things where although Patrick's a leading figure in black scholarship, we had never had any particular occasion to talk about Marlon Riggs. In a way it's an odd kind of thing, we're in the same building and we would run into each other umpteen times a week, but somehow that connection never got made until many years later.

R: For my qualifying exams, I've read a lot of the big writers out there on the particular art forms or cultural work that I'm interested in. Now I've been going back and reading more general histories of second wave feminism. Many of those authors who were there at the time drew strong delineations between socialist, liberal, and cultural/radical feminism. The writers organized these into different timelines. At the same time, as someone like myself who wasn't there and who is coming to second wave feminism by way of experimental cinema, science fiction literature, and fandom, those distinctions don't seem to make sense to me and don't effectively point to distinct areas. For example, a lot of the cultural work I'm looking at takes on issues that were first articulated by radical feminists in the late 60s but are doing so in a lesbian cultural sphere. I thought I would take the opportunity to ask you guys about the shifting use of these monikers. Did you use them? May they be used or discarded or perhaps deemphasized now?

J: We were lucky to live in political and artistic communities that got along pretty well, that is, in Bloomington and in Chicago. I have thought of myself as a socialist feminist, but then I also had a Marxist political analysis, a New Left analysis, and an academic understanding of different intellectual traditions, including artistic traditions. Interestingly, many women's studies programs were founded by socialists and that strain has remained strong in women studies. In the early years of second wave cultural/radical/lesbian feminism, I'd have found some political expressions of separatism peculiar had I chosen to participate in it. For example, one of the women's bookstores didn't want any male children over a certain age to come into the bookstore, and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was quite famous for its list of restrictions. And some of these ideas characterized the early history of feminism in academia, such as in philosophy with the group, Society for Women and Philosophy. A good friend, Sandra Bartky, a socialist feminist and a co-founder of that Society, told me some of her co-members had strong opinions against men. One day she said she felt bullied about not being a real feminist because she was a heterosexual socialist feminist. I replied, "Sandra, I'd take it like somebody telling me I should be a vegetarian. I'd say, 'Fine for you, a good idea. I'm not ready for it yet.'"

Personally I haven't ever been challenged that way. I have always had women friends from many kinds of circles. Most of the women that I knew in Chicago could be with one group of women or another and not feel uncomfortable.



Furthermore, this was particularly true of independent filmmakers. In the film community, as I experienced it, we often didn't agree aesthetically but we got along well together, went to each other's shows, and facilitated each other's work. Among feminists, the groups that I spent the less time with and was least interested in were the liberal NOW feminists who got involved in electoral politics or business advancement. In contemporary times I've come to see electoral politics as important, but at that time I didn't.

C: Our lives embrace an alternative culture, counterculture. That's always where we, *Jump Cut*, and the people we are most interested in have been. Women's studies and Black studies are always on the fringes of academia, and the avant-garde is always on the fringes of the film community, and cultural and radical and socialist feminism are all on the edges of feminist history.

R: I had a Chuck question starting from your essay on reading and thinking about the avant-garde. You're quite critical about the apolitical nature of early avant-garde film scholarship, all those books that came out in '74, so you must've written that almost immediately on their publication. My broad question was how do you see *Jump Cut* as perhaps changing the political nature of avant-garde film scholarship? How did you get into it?

C: When I arrived in Chicago, I was interested in the chance to finally see a lot more of avant-garde film again or for the first time. Chicago Filmmakers existed or was coming into existence, the Film Center where Ruby worked programmed avant-garde work regularly. There was just much more of an environment in which you could see experimental film in contrast to the years I'd been in Bloomington. I'd seen experimental film much earlier as an undergraduate, but it'd been a long time since I'd really had a chance to be immersive in it. So I think that was part of it—being in that environment. And I appreciated that viewing opportunity and wanted to write about it, so I was reading those books really intensely at the time. We've never been able to publish as much on avant-garde film/video as we would like; it's just too hard to find knowledgeable people to write essays and submit them. *Jump Cut* has never accomplished what would be even the minimum to do a good job of covering the avant-garde.

What I was interested in were those figures who in some way crossed over between having a political consciousness and being engaged in the avant-garde, filmmakers like Marjorie Keller or Bruce Baillie or Kenneth Anger. There are a lot of artists who in one way or another have a political edge to what they're doing although they might not be socialists. And that was always of interest to me.

I also saw avant-garde film as something that the Left had ignorantly or hostilely dismissed. At best, they said, "Well, I just don't understand it." *Cineaste* has published work actively hostile to anything experimental or avant-garde, but that's also a tension in *Jump Cut*. John Hess, my co-editor, has never been interested in, appreciated, or understood the avant-garde. He's just bewildered by it and he doesn't see anything political in it. In a certain way, my writing on the avant-garde is in a way writing to John, trying to explain to him that there is something that's politically important here and why we're looking at. On the other hand, my relation with JoAnn Elam was the opposite. We were always talking about the politics of the avant-garde, sexual politics, gender politics, any form of politics.

R: A younger generation of avant-garde film scholars had more of an interest in socialism—Paul Arthur Scott, McDonald, David James, Chuck's early essay. I've found that film departments, SCMS, and lots of film journals aside from *Camera*



Sending out Xmas greetings dressed in Santa hats became a yearly tradition.



Chuck always had a camera in hand, ever since high school.



Halloween.



Obscura don't have any particular interest in the avant-garde. It's a really small field. I feel like I've met nearly everyone who writes about it regularly, and I've only been around a couple of years. Although it is a small group, the interest in experimental work still seems ongoing. I know other graduate students in my department and at Stanford following it. So the scholarship is not dying, maybe just maintaining its marginality.

C: I think that's a good description—interest in the avant-garde finds a way of having a presence and of maintaining itself. It partly has to do with accessibility. Remarkably, on DVD now you can get a whole history. In contrast, for example, when I first saw *The Flower Thief* when it first came out in '62 at the University of Wisconsin Film Society, it was at a weekly screening on the off night and a large audience showed up. We considered it the latest thing that's coming out of New York or San Francisco, and here we are in the flyover and this is something interesting and amazing. We all saw it, but we knew we only got to see it once and then it went away and we'd never had a chance to see it again. We could read Jonas Mekas' columns in the *Village Voice* but they just tantalized us. To actually see experimental film, you had to go to New York and you had to know where to find it. You didn't have any recourse to see it again. I mean the whole logic of the original Anthology Film Archives was that people need to see these films more than once. "We'll have a repertory theater for avant-garde film." Great idea. You could criticize their selections but the idea was genius. That was the situation then. The avant-garde is now in a somewhat different situation. You can see a lot of DVD compilations but what's on DVD is completely uneven.

I remain committed to the idea—it's a pretty old idea going back into the 60s—that if you really want to present radical ideas, you have to have a radical form. That helps make a break that's a necessary and useful part of radical art. Not that using a traditional form means you can't put something radical in there. You can. And has a good certain effect for certain audiences. It's good—realism, neorealism, or naturalism. But Brecht said it a long time ago: Naturalism isn't totally bad. It shows that there are problems in society. It just doesn't have a solution. If you are going to have a solution, you can't let people get absorbed in the narrative and feel bad and be sad. You have to take it to another level. You have to shake them up, make them think a new way, make them think differently.

Maybe part of my thinking about that comes from having originally been involved in, so interested in theater and drama. I saw theater as a place where you have live actors in front of a live audience, and you have this dynamic that can suddenly appear in that space in an exciting way. It didn't always happen but sometimes. And when it did, it was electrifying. I think that can happen sometimes with film, but it isn't guaranteed when the audience is transported away and then there's no interaction or chance for the audience to talk about the work together or to have another kind of experience. So in many ways what you experience with the avant-garde is often fugitive, but it's always been that way.

My senior year a little group of people, maybe three or four guys, formed the experimental film club. And they did it under the auspices of the Green Lantern Co-op, an eating co-op in Madison in 63-64. The principle was you put in some labor, you put in 10 hours a week peeling potatoes or something, and you got these incredibly cheap meals for the whole week. It was a way to live marginally on the edge of a culture, and in that sense, it had the same kind of spirit as Occupy did. Every Sunday night they would screen whatever latest avant-garde films



Chuck loved having cut flowers in the house.

Jonas Mekas wrote about the week before. It was amazing. There was no context. These are the films that that are here. We would watch them and we would have this experience of them and talk with the other people in the room and be amazed. And then it would be over. It was an incredible moment in my life in in terms of film viewing. I've had that experience on other occasions and in other places. And to me that's exciting, interesting. I value that kind of experience so much that I'm glad when I can have it again and I wish that other people could have it too.

To go back to the idea of being involved in collective intellectual experience, that's satisfying over a long space of time. It is a lifetime intellectual experience that is really extraordinary. and we know a number of people who have it. Vic Wallace and Inez Hedges put out a magazine *Socialism and Democracy*, the filmmakers at Kartemquin in Chicago have worked for many years like that with more of a changing staff, Debra Zimmerman has worked like that with Women Make Movies, and we've done it with *Jump Cut*. Some people do it because they have a writing partnership that they've worked on for many years together. This kind of collaborative work is exciting. But the general tendency in graduate school is often that of the solitary scholar, and it's crazy making, both because it's an alienating experience and it's just false. In other words, two heads are better than one. The collective mind is a richer experience, but it also can keep your head on straight politically.

J: To put it another way, when Tom Waugh originally wrote his critique of that *Jump Cut* article, I think Chuck's first response was, "Wow, this is somebody I want to know, this is somebody I want to spend time with. I'm so glad to have this chance for this experience." And our relationship with Tom's been like that over the years because he's also an authority on Indian Cinema and pornography and documentary, so we have many things in common.

That's probably the biggest gain from countercultural production. At that time, theater and film work often involved collective production—even if the collectives broke up or they didn't last. But many of them have lasted over extraordinarily long periods of time. Such cultural collectivity was part of the lesbian counterculture as well although some of the lesbian institutions only survived by becoming capitalist and relatively successful economically. With *Jump Cut*, I think we figured out our comfort level economically and just didn't care about the quality of paper and what it conveyed to people.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from the '00s:



R: Did you actually hear of people commenting on the paper?

J: Oh, yes, lots. Some people really couldn't get beyond that.

C: It's the inherent snobbism in academe. A real journal is printed like a real journal and has this form and is on these kinds of pages; we know what the prestigious journals are, and other things don't count. It continues today in terms of some institutions and professors denouncing open source, or any kind of online production. Often, an online journal doesn't contribute to tenure the same way that print does. Maybe that's only in the United States because it's not true in, let's say, China. But there's this endless ranking.

We always knew there were certain places where the library didn't carry *Jump Cut*. Even though the school had a large film studies program, it was clear that faculty said we don't want our library to carry *Jump Cut*. The film or English department wouldn't make a simple request to say we should carry this cheap little journal. Our revenge is that since we're online, everyone reads it. Young scholars and film students start citing it, and more conservative scholars could never control this broad access to it. It's clear that our politics made a whole bunch of people uncomfortable—the feminism, gay lesbian queer politics, socialist politics, international perspectives

J: In a certain way, people would use snob or elite standards as a way of protecting themselves from taking us seriously or thinking about what we were doing. On the other hand, there was this other function that persisted in a hidden way. All of a sudden you would find that some people at conferences were nice to you, whom you had no idea that you had anything in common with politically. You met a lot of gay men that way.

C: Yes, someone whom I always thought was politically conservative or traditional or reserved all of a sudden would see me at a conference and say: "Oh, Chuck, how are you doing? You're really doing a lot of good work with *Jump Cut*." Not that they would come out of the closet and write anything for you or do anything else, but they would recognize that you were taking on certain issues that were important to them, and you were giving younger people more of a chance to express those things.

Another thing to add is about how Julia and I had academic careers that have been unorthodox and uneven. It partly depends on the fact that we didn't have children or dependents. If I were a breadwinner for a family and I had two kids, I'd need to have done a lot more things like publishing books instead of just articles in order to make full professor. I was freed of that responsibility. I could be the ordinary person that I am. I'm not critical of people who have to make certain compromises to provide for a family. No one else will. It's perfectly logical that you do certain things which might be career positive and cut back on other things. What I don't agree with is the idea that you need to be politically conservative.

Julia and I and John had different career patterns from the model one. Part of that was our own individual histories. Both John and I served in the Armed Forces before we went to graduate school. That gave us a different orientation about what was going on. Also, I was always an activist in graduate school and a radical—organizing student events and building the teaching assistants' union.



Julia had been a high school teacher for a number of years and then taught in in Lima, Peru, before coming back to graduate school. She ended up returning just when the women's movement was picking up, and she got into that immediately. Then when Julia taught at Circle campus, she didn't get continued on for tenure, and because of the campus protests around that, she was blacklisted for twelve years, not just in Chicago but nationally. She had a whole lot of different projects, working part time, getting visiting teaching jobs, learning video production, going to Nicaragua and making videos there, teaching video there. She had an erratic and irregular career before she ended up here at University of Oregon.

During all that time, I held on to my job at Northwestern, because we really needed one job for the two of us to keep going. When I started teaching at Northwestern, I never thought I would get tenure. I didn't imagine that they would ever really hire me for that. It was a fluke that I did get the job and especially that I ended up getting tenure there.



On the other hand, because I was born in '42 right at the beginning of the cusp of the Baby Boomers, somehow I always thought I would have a job. I used to say when people would ask me about teaching and I didn't have an academic job, I'd say, "I'm an intellectual." And then, "I drive a school bus," which would just throw the conversation off completely. Lot of academics don't know how to talk to someone who isn't just like them. When I graduated with a PhD, the bottom had fallen out of the humanities job market. There was a recession in higher education in '72-'73, and people weren't getting jobs in literature and humanities fields. So I did what I had to do. I managed to get a job teaching part-time remedial English at Chicago State, a college with mostly black students. And that was because when I was a TA, I'd started doing tutoring some students who were admitted under a special program to get more black students at Indiana. So I'd voluntarily worked as a tutor with them. Then I got asked by Black Studies to teach a special section of the intro course in Comparative Literature for those students. I remember saying, "Wouldn't it be better if a black person taught this?" and they said, "There aren't any. Don't you think you'd be better than just anybody with fewer credentials?" I could then end up at Chicago State teaching part-time there. Essentially, I re-engineered myself as learning how to teach remedial composition.



So I became a specialist, and with that then I ended up getting work at Northeastern Illinois University teaching English as a second language and remedial composition. In the meantime, we'd started *Jump Cut*. Then it was a fluke. The person who was the head of the film program at Northwestern, Paddy Whannel, was an old socialist who liked *Jump Cut*. He asked if I could teach a course for them in Film Theory and in Experimental Film: "Chuck, we need to have somebody to come in and teach because Peter Wollen lost his job and went back to England. Could you teach that?" "Sure, okay, I can teach that." Because I wanted to work, I then taught myself to be a film teacher. It was one of those things where you just had to be flexible and adaptive. I even learned film production at Northwestern; I already worked in photography so it wasn't such a big jump.

It seems to me that if you define yourself as an intellectual rather than as an academic (my goal in life is not to be an academic but an intellectual), then you fit into lots of ways of becoming one. And I know how hard that sometimes is—especially when I read about the exiles from Central Europe in World War II and in the '30s with the rise of Hitler. All these people like Benjamin, Adorno, and Brecht had to leave Germany; their lives were completely uprooted, and they had to remake themselves in a new situation not to their choosing. But they managed to continue and survive and be flexible and grow.



In a certain way *Jump Cut* is part of that process. I mean in *Jump Cut* we've never cared whether someone had PhD after their name. We never cared if someone was a professor or just an enthusiast. We gave more credibility to somebody accomplished, like a filmmaker, who had practical knowledge about how films are made, than someone who had a purely theoretical knowledge.

It's crucial, too, that John Hess stayed with *Jump Cut*. He taught at San Francisco State for 17 years as an ABD lecturer, but he also organized the lecturers and the adjunct 's union for the whole Cal State system. And then he did actually get his Ph.D. Twenty years after he started comp lit at Indiana, they let him get a PhD; then he went on and taught at Ithaca and Maryland and a couple of other places. Then he wanted to go back to Berkeley and he became a very successful union organizer. John's been an intellectual and a film teacher but in a certain way; he's better known least in California as a union leader. I tell you these stories about our careers because *Jump Cut* has always had this relationship of being a project by people who have had long periods of precarity. I worked for five or six years at various jobs before I ever got a tenure track job. Julia spent twelve years on the road doing gigs. But the magazine let us continue as intellectuals putting forward our own ideas.



We never had to fit into the writing you'd have to do to get published then in *Film Quarterly* or *Cinema Journal*. In this regard, there's a fascinating story about *Cinema Journal* when it first started. The first two editors, Richard Dyer McCann who was a film historian and Iowa and then Jack Gallows who was a film historian at Northwestern were clear about their goal: the way to get prestige for film studies was to only publish articles in history because academics understand history and history is an accepted discipline. "So we're saying we're doing history, but now it's about movies." For that reason the early *Cinema Journal* never had any critical articles, theoretical articles, anything institutional or economic, certainly nothing on television. The editors felt they had to get themselves accepted within academe by the rules that already existed. Eventually that changed because Virginia Wexman became the editor and was more flexible and opened things up. And although SCMS has now changed in important ways, at that at that time *Jump Cut* was alone in saying, well, we think it's really important to focus on feminist or gay or whatever issues we want to talk about. We're not offering what fits into a somebody's thematic special section or what fits into somebody's preconceived ideas about what the right length of an article is or the right discourse use in it, or the right number of footnotes.



I think the other function of that is we've always been really conscious about who our readership is and clearly addressing our audience. We're happy to publish theory, but we think that theory can be made reasonably understandable to people beyond just academic specialists. We've found our readership appreciates clear prose, and working with younger writers we've often been able to show people how they could write that way.

R: I remember in an early editorial you talk about including film reviews as a form of demystifying theory—when you analyze a film you are practicing theory of a kind that doesn't necessarily have to take a particular form that's popular at the time.

C: Also we were sure in our understanding of that new theory that was coming out—semiotics, French writing, etc. Julia and I had the experience of European



travel. Julia had gone to the Summer Film Institute that *Screen* ran in Stirling, Scotland, in 1971; and she and I went together the next year. That was the first of the *Screen* Summer Institutes I went to. *Screen* was published then by the Society for Education in Film and Television, SEFT, an association for UK teachers of film and television, usually in the high schools, because they didn't have any college or University level courses in that subject. Film wasn't taught anywhere in colleges and universities anywhere in the UK. So SEFT would run these little summer schools where teachers could get together and most of it was oriented towards pedagogy. Partly because of this uneven development, intellectuals interested in the film actually got heavily involved in SEFT and therefore in *Screen*. There's a whole history of those things in British film studies and how it got created, at first in association with the British Film Institute's education department.

So all of that was going on. When Julia came back from that first trip, she told me, "You won't believe what these people are into." "What's that?" "Remember those Rock Hudson melodramas of the '50s? They were Sirk films." I said, "Yeah," and she said, "They actually think those films are wonderful and carry a serious critique of U.S. culture." Well, I can't believe this.

The next summer I was writing my dissertation and Julia was doing research for her dissertation on Godard. We went to Paris for the summer and didn't know when we'd come back as I didn't have any further funding and Julia didn't either. We just thought we'd stay in Paris and London until the money ran completely out and then fly home. While we were there, Julia said, there's a big annual theater festival, the most prestigious one in France in Avignon. It was a two-week festival and I wanted to go because I was really interested in theater and writing a dissertation on theater. Julia said, "*Cahiers du Cinema* is putting on these workshops and Godard is one of their topics." The *Cahiers* workshops ran in the morning where they would talk about either Godard or Chinese film. They were really into Chinese Cultural Revolution era opera and wide-screen documentaries as well as Godard's latest films, the Dziga Vertov period films.

I wanted to see theater at night but there was nothing to do with the daytime. So I went to these film sessions, and it was a revelation. These writers were supposed to be the most high level Marxist-Leninist film theory people in the world, and I could see what was wrong with their politics. First of all, their sexual politics in terms of which they were a bunch of assholes. Having come out of the U.S. New Left where we had been organizing for some time against the Vietnam War, we'd learned a lot of things. It was easy to see how these bright French intellectuals who knew a lot about film really didn't know too much about politics, or even how to make sense out of things. So Julia and I went to that workshop and were rather disgusted by it. At that point, I realized, well, if these are the most highly developed left film people and I can see what's wrong with them, the field has room for me.

Then we went on to England to the event in Scotland and that was another revelation. All of these male intellectuals had the same set of ideas that were in early *Screen*. At this point in their development, they were just translating things like the *Cahiers du Cinema*'s "Cinema Ideology Criticism" and "*Young Mr. Lincoln*" essays. It was relatively easy to critique what they were doing. Clearly they knew a lot about film, but it was also clear to see their limits. At least it was for me. When we came back from that trip, I thought, "Wow, this is the most advanced stuff that's being done in film. And it's easy to see how you could develop a critique of it and take it further."

R: Generally how has the journal changed over the decades? For instance, what opportunities has digital publishing provided?

J: A big change as we've moved to electronic publishing is the ability to run frame grabs. We're doing 50 to 60 frame grabs with captions for each essay. We don't have the bandwidth to run video, and the authors write extensive captions with the frame grabs that makes publishing these images fair use. So that's made a huge difference in how our writers conceive their essays. Then starting about three or four issues ago, one of our authors suggested doing a visual essay on "Serbian cutting." We began his essay with a whole visual layout of illustrative material and now suggest this approach to a number of writers who are analyzing complex films or issues. I think that visual amplification adds a new dimension, especially if I'm reading about a film that I've never seen. I get such an idea from the visual essay that I could never get just from about reading a film. So I think this kind of change represents the advantage of digital publishing.

Another aspect of digital publishing is that we don't like repetition, but we're not worried about length. Some of the pieces we've run are quite long. I ran, for example, my article on torture documentaries, which really would be monograph length. It was about 90 pages long, and it allowed me to develop not only an analysis of specific films, but to question what does it mean when we get witnesses in these films, especially people who were in the military and involved in court cases and have rehearsed and planned testimony. What do first person interviews with those witnesses then mean in documentary? And the other thing was that I had a long psychoanalytic perspective on what we get from viewing torture reportage. Why would we want to watch torture? What does it mean as for a spectator to choose to see that? I couldn't have done all that in one article in traditional publishing.

In terms of writers, people send essays that are sometimes specialized, or in unexpected areas, all over the map. It was more focused in the '70s. Then we said, we're going to deal with contemporary mainstream Hollywood films and give them a political analysis. That's what will bring people in the door, and then we can publish this other stuff about avant-garde film or about theory or Latin American Cinema. After the Alternative Cinema Conference, we committed ourselves to writing articles on political documentary but that was a big failure. I tried really hard to get that going but there was no sustaining it. Potential writers would get and watch a film on video and never hand something in, so the filmmaker would be put out.



Workshoppers at the March 2014 Society for Cinema Studies meeting in Seattle to celebrate 40 years of publication: *Jump Cut* authors and editors.

Media studies is a field that's expanded and specialized so much, what gets submitted to us reflects that. There's also the fact that film studies, media studies is now really well-established. No longer do we have to stake our claim and explain the importance of our field to other people, other than the most head-in-

the-sand English Department people. For everybody else there's no question that film studies is of course important. Cultural studies, too; popular culture, no problem.

R: How quickly did you started to get more submissions from unknown writers, versus who you were soliciting?

J: It's really dramatic. [Julia showing *Jump Cut* on computer] So this is the first electronic issue, No. 44, and in it we have five articles. In the next there's quite a few more articles. Go now to No. 53. It's huge. That change has come from writers submitting from all over the world.

R: Still you had quite a few essays in your print issues. And looking back at the first issues, I'm impressed with how many came out each year.

J: I'm afraid we couldn't keep up the pace of four issues a year, but we was had it as a goal for a while. It became easier to set up a work process by sections. So there'd be a section of manuscript reading and a section of revisions and a section of image collection—these would be at different times of the year. We settled into a once-a-year routine pretty much within five or six years.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Did pre-1979 Iranian cinema produce Third Cinema films?

by [Asefeh Sadeghi-Esfahlani](#)



Film poster—*Where is the Friend's House?* (1985).

In 2019, an Iranian documentary film *Tree of Life* (Babanorouzi) probed the fate of unprofessional child actors in the internationally celebrated Iranian film, *Where is the Friend's House?* (1986, dir Kiarostami). In the documentary we see the child actors of Kiarostami's film as grown-up adults whose lives have heavily been eclipsed by the experience of acting in a famous film. At the time of acting they did not own a TV at home and had never gone to a cinema in the city. After the completion of the film, although it was screened in their village's school, they could not realize its significance. Furthermore, while Kiarostami went on to achieve international fame, the children could never participate in any other film project.



Kiarostami sought to blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction. The children acted as he directed. Kiyoumars Poorahmad, director's assistant, wrote a memoir about the making of *Friend's House*. He explained how Kiarostami often planned out situations through which real reactions and emotions such as fear could be evoked and filmed. In this begging scene's production, the child really cried.



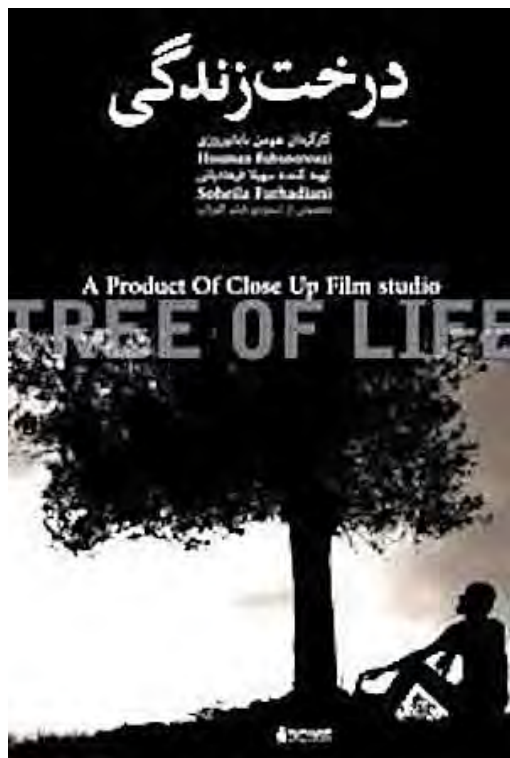
Many problems arose in the making of *Friend's House*. Poorahmad in his memoir said that the film was based on a short story by Behrouz Tajvar, a primary school teacher. The amount of money Kiarostami offered Tajvar to buy the copy was so insignificant that Tajvar refused the deal altogether. There was no contract and Kiarostami did not credit Tajvar as the writer of the original story. (<https://www.isna.ir/news/99091007556/>)




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| <p>Another failure to credit. People who worked with Kiarostami say that Kambouzia Partovi, a famous Iranian screenwriter and director, helped Kiarostami to find the village location for <i>Friend's House</i>—in Partovi's grandmother's village. Partovi knew the people and helped Kiarostami to adapt and complete the script, yet there is no mention of Partovi in the film's title sequence.</p> | <p>The house of Partovi's grandmother in the village was used as Ahmad's house. She also acted in the film.</p> |

In *Tree of Life* we see one of Kiarostami's actors, a simple worker in a shopping center in Tehran, after he quit substance addiction. Another heartbreaking scene shows a mother of two speaking about how the experience of acting in such a famous film impacted her sons' lives. The film's focus is on the issue of children's rights and the ethics of employing such young children in a professional film project.

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| <p>In <i>Tree of Life</i> the camera searches for the Ahmadzadeh brothers, as non-professional actors appeared in <i>Friend's House</i>.</p> | <p>One of them works in a nursing home as his second job.</p> |
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Film poster; *Tree of Life*. (2019).

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| The documentary investigates the effects of professional filmmaking on the non-professional participants. | The Ahamdzadeh brothers wonder why they have not benefitted from the film's international success |

However, I use this example to follow another path of enquiry: Was it not possible to make the film collectively? More importantly, was it not possible for the director and the production team to go beyond the traditional divisions of labor and hierarchies of command in order to produce a film that would empower the children's own artistic expressivity? In this regard, I am pointing experience of Third Cinema film-making. It was posited as a form of cultural labor in which a production team collectively generates a new social vision among all its participants. I ask this because a country like Iran which underwent a process of radicalization leading to the 1979 revolution and the overthrow of an imperialist-backed royal system, and I want to know if we could find traces of Third Cinema practices and productions? Did film movements such as Argentina's *Cine Liberación* emerge? If not, what were the industrial, formal and political obstacles?

To see if Iranian directors had a choice to follow a kind of Third Cinema working model, I investigated the history of First, Second and Third cinema in Iran, and offer my conclusions here. I briefly examine the condition of Iranian filmmaking before the 1979 revolution to illuminate what set of political, cultural and economic circumstances did shape film production in that period. And I also briefly introduce the theory of First, Second and Third Cinema as it was developed in Latin American during the evolution of anti-imperialist and Third-World movements. In fact, Third Cinema is not an idea or phenomenon limited to a certain moment in time (post-World War II liberation movements in the former colonized countries) or certain locations (Latin America, Africa, etc). It became an idea that has shaped on-going efforts in filmmaking that attempt to dissolve the hierarchies of command and to create radical consciousness. Following that, I will explore pre-1979 Iranian cinema to see how this categorization might or might not apply to condition of filmmaking in Iran. This production history indicates

that despite the radical atmosphere of 1970s Iran, traces of Third Cinema practices are not easily detected. For that reason, I will indicate possible political, cultural and economic factors which impeded the development of Third Cinema practice in pre-1979 Iranian cinema. Interestingly, in the absence of radical cinema, other media such audiocassette and photography took up a progressive role and provided up-to-date representations of the brutal realities of an early capitalist society; they created revolutionary consciousness.

What do we mean by First, Second and Third Cinema?

After the Second World War when the colonial world order was in the process of transformation around the globe, new liberation movements appeared in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The enthusiasm emerging from the anti-colonial struggles in Cuba, Vietnam and Algeria found its expression especially in the 1955 Bandung Conference of non-aligned African and Asian nations.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Also known as the Third World countries, against the First (Capitalist) and Second (Soviet Union and Eastern blocs) worlds, they attempted to achieve independence from imperialist domination and its cultural hegemony. Their political demands were crystalized in a wave of militant manifestos that announced new criteria for arts and cinema. The wide range of anti-imperialist critical writings on cinema during the 1950s gradually inspired a film theory that prioritized nationalist concerns, seeking “an alternative, independent, anti-imperialist cinema more concerned with militancy than with auteurist self-expression or consumer satisfaction.”[2]

The works inspired by this perspective were shown in numerous film festival in Havana, Cuba (considering New Latin American cinema), in Carthage, Tunisia (regarding Arab and African cinema) and in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (dedicated to African and Afro-diasporic cinemas) and they inspired the development of further styles and forms within the broad movement.[3]

The need to raise revolutionary consciousness culminated in the production of films made simultaneously with anti-colonial struggles:

- films by Algeria’s National Liberation Front (FLN),
- films by Fidelista Film during anti-Batista campaign in Cuba,
- FRELIMO Film in Mozambique,
- ICAIC, the Cuban Film Institute
- El Salvador Venceremos Film and Video Collective and
- El Salvador Film Institute.[4]

The Cuban revolution and Peronist and Peron’s notion of a “third way” in Argentina played a crucial role in the emergence of Third Cinema theory and practice which drew on diverse currents such as Soviet montage, Surrealism, Italian neo-realism, Brechtian epic theatre, cinema verite and French New Wave as well as filmmakers innovative ideas and styles.[5]

The categories of First, Second and Third Cinema were primarily outlined by Latin American filmmakers such as Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, then further elaborated, extended and theorized by contemporary filmmakers and theorists. The approach towards politics in this categorization “address[es] unequal access to and distribution of material and cultural resources, and the hierarchy of legitimacy and status accorded to those differentials.”[6] Therefore, this approach to cinema has developed an appropriate theoretical tool to probe historical conditions of production of films, particularly, in a context of Imperialism and early capitalism.

Solanas and Getino defined First Cinema as a “consumer good” that at its best merely testifies to the decadence of bourgeois lifestyle and remains a witness to the prevalent social injustices, probing capitalism’s effects not causes. They named it “surplus value cinema” since it is a cinema of mystification. Such films “were destined to satisfy only the ideological and economic interests of the owners of the film industry, the lords of the world film market, the great majority of whom were from the United States.”[7] First Cinema refers to mainstream cinema, commercial film production which primarily includes Hollywood and its national imitators around the world.[8]

Second Cinema includes art house cinema and authorial cinema. It is the cinema of

“institutionalized national culture, the cinema of authorial expressivity, the cinema of the middle class, the cinema of psychological crisis, ... the cinema of poverty as a great moral question (rather than a question of socio-economic relations), and sometimes the cinema of poverty as aesthetic beauty.”[9]

Often Second Cinema converges with First Cinema attempting to create mythical and archetypal narration that transcends history. The way both First and Second Cinema evade articulating the historical specificity of social problems highlights that these modes of filmmaking also avoid dissecting the roots of inequalities and injustices produced by capitalism. [10] In addition, while Second Cinema is interested in the stories that tend to be ignored by First Cinema, it transforms particular stories into the example of general human condition, hence making new myths:

“While First Cinema is generally quite positive and affirmative of the capacity of individuals to change their circumstances, Second Cinema tends to be more pessimistic, hence the importance of cyclical structures and motifs, repetition or the prevalence of psychological break down.”[11]

Third Cinema, however, avoids universalizing mythical patterns and notions since it is deeply rooted in history. As it is not reduced to narrativizing anti-historical structures and cycles, it can develop scripts for social and cultural emancipation. At the same time, Third Cinema does not seek to invent completely new cinematic forms and language. It does not appear as the opposition to or rejection of the dominant or the art house cinema. Rather it has a dialectical relation with them through transforming their already established conventions.[12] This kind of radical film theory and practice was pioneered by Latin American intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s who prioritized cinema as a communication tool in their relations with the masses during the liberation movements. In that context Third Cinema seemed like a tool for the “decolonization of culture.”[13] It was an aid to construct a new type of liberated subject—both through the filmmaking process and in a film text on the big screen. Among many such films are, for example

- *The Hour of Furnaces* (documentary, Argentina, 1967, dir. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino),
- *Tire die* (documentary, Argentina, 1960, dir. Fernando Birri),
- *Hanoi, Martes 13* (Cuba, documentary, 1967, dir. Santiago Alvarez)
- *Blood of the Condor* (Bolivia, feature fiction, 1969, dir. Jorge Sanjines),
- *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Cuba, feature fiction, 1969, dir. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea)

Such films have had a great impact. Contemporary film theorists recognize four key markers in these Third Cinema productions that continue to inspire new generations of politically motivated practitioners. First of all, Third Cinema is

Images from Third Cinema classic film:
Tire die (Throw a Dime, documentary, Argentina, 1960, dir. Fernando Birri) .



In Birri's *Tire die* (1962) the boundaries between documentary and fiction are blurred. Birri achieved this through collaboration with children and adults from the slums of Santa Fe, Argentina.



The filmmakers and local people talked about life in the slum. Nearly one hundred children there learned how to make a film during the process as it was a collective endeavor.



The film takes its name—“throw a dime”—from a dangerous practice in which the slum children run alongside passing trains asking passengers to throw down a coin.



At first *Tire Die* ran for an hour. Then Birri went to the slum and screened the film for the people and children and asked them what they liked and did not. According to their comments he re-edited the film into half an hour. The finished film was a collective production.



The camera registers the reluctance and amusement of middle class passengers facing the children's demands, yet it does not remain indifferent and makes clear the need for social change.

committed to historicity and recognizes history as a process of transformation, contradiction and conflict. This type of cinema seeks to provide a response for questions such as where we are, how we reached here, and who we are. Second, this kind of filmmaking has a commitment to politicizing viewers. With this goal, Third Cinema is a cinema of awakening, an image-creating medium to represent why and how people become conscious about their exploitation and oppression. Third, this type of filmmaking tries to increase its viewers' critical abilities as it nourishes and expands spectators' intellectual and cognitive power. Instead of merely stirring up emotion, it encourages a rational examination of the particular conditions that it sketches. And the last characteristic of Third Cinema is its focus on cultural specificity, with a result that this cinema demonstrates an admirable level of familiarity with both cultural practices such as dance, rituals, literature, etc. and also with culture as a way of life.[14]

Although the aims of Third Cinema appear highly sophisticated and maybe elitist, it is noteworthy that Third Cinema insists on finding ways to reach the greater masses of people. Some of the filmmakers use narrative fiction in order to reach a wider public. One of these, Fernando Birri, mentioned that Third Cinema had four key elements; it was supposed to be a nationalist, realist and critical cinema as well as a popular cinema. He himself turned to fiction since "the narrative construction had a much greater power of communication, and can embrace a much wider horizon than the documentary." [15]

Third Cinema's move towards the masses did not stop at the level of spectator but went beyond that and reached into the process of production. Octavio Getino called this "a cinema made collectively" [16] which meant involving ordinary people in filmmaking. Third Cinema pioneered democratic modes of production which aimed to change the labor hierarchies that the film industry institutionalizes as a microcosm of the social totality.[17] At the level of working practices, Third Cinema creators have been concerned democratizing filmmaking, including

- how a production group operates,
- what kind of internal structures they adhere to,
- how they transform prevalent hierarchies
- how they shape innovative collaborative models,
- how the non-professional people (particularly those who are filmed) might give feedback, etc..

"Here there is a whole deeply complex set of issues regarding the relationship between the middle class professionals and their relationship with groups who have not had the cultural and educational benefits of their upbringing." [18]

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Farrah Pahlavi was present at the opening night of the festival and would hand out awards to the winners on the closing night. Farrah greeting the British delegate in the festival. *The Daily Telegraph* ran a report and asked that why Tehran Film Festival did not become the Film Festival of the Third World? It said probably such a festival would be held in Tashkent. From this newspaper's perspective, Tehran intended to follow the West with Cannes Film Festival as its model. (Translated text published in *Sinema 53*, number 14, 1974, p. 13).



Pasolini filming *A Thousand and One Nights* in Iran (left). Isfahani workers whom Pasolini brought to the project (right).

As the theory and practice of Third Cinema developed, it was not limited to Latin America. Inspired by the possibility of tricontinental revolutions, filmmakers in the Middle East also joined new cinema movements. For example, in the Middle East, films like *Cairo '30* (1966, dir Salah abu Seif) and *The Rebels* (1968, dir Tewfik Saleh) that depicted Egyptian anti-colonial struggles motivated filmmakers in Lebanon, Tunisia and Egypt. Palestinian and Algerian resistance organizations produced short propaganda films. In Morocco, the journal *Cinema 3* appeared in which the three in title referred to the Third World. As the conference of non-aligned countries took place in December 1973 in Algeria, a meeting of Third World filmmakers was held there too. [19] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) It is not clear if a representative from the Iranian cinema participated in the event as I did not find an indication in memoirs of filmmakers and the Iranian film journals.

From a political perspective, Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi, the Shah at the time, was viewed as a strategic ally of the western capitalist countries, and he did not sympathize with the non-allied movement. During Arab-Israel conflicts in 1967, the Shah supported Israel and sold oil to them. He also invited Israeli military officers to Iran to train security forces in order to combat the radical movement. [20] And even when most of the Third World countries boycotted apartheid South African regime, this Shah had friendly relations with that government and sold them oil. In this way Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi appeared as the supporter of states who advocated institutional discrimination and racial injustice. In 1973 Shah's army openly participated in Dhofar war in Oman to combat what he called the spread of communism in the region.

Thus, in Iran a progressive social force was not in power to back a radical cinema. From the late 1960s on, however, an Iranian New-Wave of filmmaking appeared and contained social criticism and radical politics that bore resemblance to the Third World cinema around the globe. The connection to the radical global film movement is clear, for example, in the invitations made to Tehran International Film Festival (TIFF). This annual event, funded by Farrah Pahlavi (queen at the time)'s office, showcased the paradoxical tendencies in the Iranian film industry. The organizers wanted to host the most famous and progressive artists as the jury and guests in their event so they invited filmmakers, including Gillo Pontecorvo, an internationally well-known radical director. The jury then had autonomy in their selections for prizes. Iranian director Kamran Shirdel's radical short film *The Night that It Rained* won the prize for best short film, but, as I will discuss in the next section, the film was banned by its own producer, the Ministry of Art, Shirdel was expelled from the ministry, and the film negatives were confiscated.

My research has shown that a number of radical filmmakers traveled to Iran for various purposes, yet although they might have been curious about the country, they did not contact professionals in the film industry. Pier Paolo Pasolini caused a provocation in this regard. In 1973 Pasolini traveled to Iran and visited Isfahan in order to film scenes of his *A Thousand and One Nights*. *The Film va Honar magazine* [21], a professional film periodical promoting art house cinema in Iran, sent its journalists to the film location in Isfahan and published a report regarding the Italian director's ten-day journey.

It turned out that early in the morning Pasolini wandered in Isfahan and selected a number of ordinary people in the streets, coffee houses, etc. to act, mostly



Film va Honar journalist reported that during the first days Pasolini worked in the Shekh Lotfollah mosque, the famous ancient building in Naqsh-e Jahan square in Isfahan. Yet, the crowd present at the scene's filming protested against nudity of actors in the mosque. To watch the film please visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEJl5mA10_E



Pasolini sought out non-professional, working class people for his film.



Photo from backstage —A Man from South of the

simple workers. The journalists found it quite unusual that Pasolini did not have a script, was himself the cameraman, and could use two cameras simultaneously without an assistant. They thought he undermined the professional division of labor, but, in fact, it was one of the early examples of practicing alternative methods of filmmaking in the country. The media thought it curious that a director might not select a commercially viable superstar and would practice an alternative politics of production. This and the cultural interaction at international festivals signalled alternative ways of filmmaking to nourish the Iranian New Wave.



To avoid people's reaction, the film crew moved to the Ali-Qapou castle next to the mosque.



The music room in the castle.



Film va Honar's journalist reported that there many sexual scenes were filmed in the castle, yet only film crew were allowed in.



The journal also commented on casting. While searching among workers particularly on construction sites, Pasolini sought different faces that did not belong to the twentieth century.

Nonetheless, later in the 1990s Third Cinema theory and practice encountered serious challenges worldwide. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the inability of the post-revolutionary states in many liberated countries to materialize their collective ideals impacted cinema. "The realization that the 'wretched of the earth' are not unanimously revolutionary (not necessarily allied to one another) and the recognition that international geopolitics and the global economic system have obliged even socialist regimes to make peace with transnational capitalism" prompted filmmakers to reconfigure their theories.[22] In particular, the notion of "nation" had to be critically reconsidered. For instance, the later radical filmmakers, influenced by women's movements around the world, dealt with patriarchy in their societies, which led to challenging questions about the unity of a supposed "nations" and political movements. "With the rise of theoretical debates which emphasized the ways in which national identity is mediated, textualized, constructed and imagined," radical political organizing faced the need to recognize approaches that take class, gender and sexuality into account.[23]

Some radical filmmakers drew attention to the representation of Forth World people.[24] To counter the way that a voice-over in ethnographic films often



In the early 1960s, films included emergent practices. Here are scenes of group labor and difficult working conditions. (*Bride of Sea*).

described indigenous people, filmmakers arrived at novel methods of working with their subjects—such as “participatory filmmaking,” “dialogical anthropology,” and “interactive filmmaking.” The concern was no longer how to represent the “other” but rather how to collaborate with the “other”:

“The goal, rarely realized, is to guarantee the effective participation of the “other” in all phases of production, including theoretical production.”[25]

In addition, towards the end of twentieth century there were attempts in the developed world to expand the scope of Third Cinema practice to the rest of the world. In 1986 concurrent with Edinburgh International Film Festival (EIFF) a conference was organized about the relevance of Third Cinema to contemporary film culture in general. The speakers and organizers discussed Third Cinema as a potential way forward. Hopefully, its premises could outline a cultural politics “far more relevant to contemporary cultural issue than any form of post-structural or any other kind of ‘post’ theory.”[26] As Teshome Gabriel indicated, the location of the production of a Third Cinema film is not as important as the set of values and beliefs it advocates and the kind of consciousness it awakens.[27]

As I have outlined, Third Cinema in theory and practice has evolved since its birth in the 1960s, and today it exists in a dialectical relation with other radical mediamaking methods around the globe. In the next section I will discuss its influence on Iranian film.

Radical categorization and the Iranian film industry

I have undertaken this project because it seems noteworthy that film scholars have not examined Iranian cinema’s relation to the categories of First, Second and Third Cinema. For example, I have encountered scholars who argue that this categorization of films could not be applied to an Iranian context because of our country’s historical, economic and social specificity. However, considering recent information which has become accessible through memoirs and historical studies, one can challenge such an exceptionalist view. I consider it important to demonstrate how the logic of capital operates in the field of modern media to shape a kind of production pattern in Iran. The history and shape of this production pattern are also recognizable in other developing countries and make a comparative perspective possible.

The first issue that arises is whether First Cinema as characterized by the theorists and practitioners existed during decades prior to the 1979 revolution in Iran. As I mentioned above, First Cinema has markers such as similarities with Hollywood productions and its national imitators around the world. At the level of production team, this kind of filmmaking relies on a highly professional team who follow a standard division of labor in the industry. Also, big studios produce films with significantly high budgets, and the studios collaborate with established networks of distributions which secure their almost monopoly position in the film market. Moreover, at the level of narrative and representational form, the films made adhere to conventions of classic Hollywood films which follow the standard realist mode of representation.

When we compare Iranian commercial film production with its global counterparts, we encounter a number of differences. Primarily, we should bear in mind that the Iranian cinema industry underwent intense transformation from the 1950s to 1970s. Therefore, here the object of inquiry did not remain static and intact throughout this period of fast industrialization. The memoirs written by the people involved in this industry testify to this variability. For instance, Ayyob Shahbazi, an expert in and technician of developing analogue film, started his



In these films, we can often see animals in the same frame with humans' or somewhere near them. (*Shores of Awaiting* and *Bride of Sea*).



Emergent practices also include conflicts with social boundaries. Here the lovers are depicted as if entrapped by the limitations of their environment. (*Bride of Sea*).

cinematic career as a simple technical worker in the production teams;[28] he wrote about the condition of commercial studios where he worked during late 1960s and 1970s. According to him, numerous small film studios were located in Tehran, mostly in one neighbourhood. In the 1960s the starting capital of most of the studios was relatively modest, and the investors frequently went bankrupt. Therefore, a film producer or director would use various studios to execute the technical processes required to make a film. And such a studio was often an apartment in a residential area where each room was allocated to a particular laboratory task such as sound, film developing, etc.[29]

In addition, one person might be in charge of numerous responsibilities. In working on the film *Mardi Az Jonoob-e Shahr* [*A Man from South of the City*] (1969, dir Saber Rahbar) Shahbazi functioned as the director's assistant and also as the sound recorder, among many other positions.[30] The director of the film Saber Rahbar would do lighting, build sets, and direct actors.[31] In another instance, Shahbazi indicated that the team had no costume designer so the extras had no one to tell them what to wear on set. They had to bring their own clothes—suits and various ties and hats. The discrepancy of clothes on a set for a luxury party (a recurrent scene in the commercial films) was funny and even ridiculous.[32] Such instances indicate that in Iran's commercial film production sector of the 1960s, the division of labor was quite unprofessional and the studio system, as it existed in Hollywood, could not be found in Tehran. The films made in the early 1960s were made in this condition and in such studios. Although they were made commercially, yet they were not mere consumer goods or "surplus value cinema." In this transient period, the fissure of high vs. low art was not tangible in the industry. In films such as *Daughter of Mountains* [*Dokhtar-e Koohestan*] (1963, dir Mahmmad-Ali Jafari), *Brid of Sea* [*Aroos-e Darya*] (1965, dir Aramis Yousefians) and *Shore of Awaiting* [*Sahel-e Entezar*] (1963, dir Siamak Yasemi) the unprofessional division of labor which required a group labor process endowed a flexible form to the films—to the extent that they developed a capacity for emergent, progressive and sometimes oppositional practices as well as familiar traditional ones.[33]



In *Shores of Awaiting* we observe oppositional practices, violent confrontation between the fishermen and the master's people.



The first person from the right is Arman the director and the second, the cameraman Ahmad Shirazi filming *Bride of Sea*. It is said that Shirazi freely and actively collaborated with the directors. He praised Soviet cinema, particularly melodramas

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| | |
| | such as <i>The Cranes are Flying</i> (1957). |



Scenes of physical violence prevailed in mainstream cinema in the mid 1960s. *Treasure of Korah* (1965), an extremely popular film, consolidated the characteristics of mainstream cinema for almost a decade. This also included explicit fight scenes.

However, this mode of filmmaking changed drastically from the mid 1960s and throughout 1970s as the filmmaking companies developed, expanded and began to influence the process of production and distribution. The case of Rex Film Company testifies to this process. This film studio was established by Rashidian brothers, well-known businessmen and close to the royal Pahlavi court. They gradually bought cinemas across the country, and by the 1979 they owned 13 cinemas in important industrial cities such as Abadan. During the process they did film productions. For instance, after the immense success of popular comic film *Samad and Solomon's rug* [Samad va Qaliche Hazrat Soleiman] (1971, dir Parviz Sayyad), they bought the copyright of the Samad character from the scriptwriter and director Parviz Sayyad. Until 1979 Sayyad continued to make six more Samad comic films all produced by Rex Studio. As Ali Abbasi stated, [34] during the 1970s the success of some commercial film productions encouraged big investors to enter the film industry only for fast profit. Abbasi named as an example Mohammad Karim-Arbab, who owned seven nightclubs only in Tehran and many cinemas across the country. In the 1970s Karim-Arbab founded Ferdowsi film studio and participated in the production of commercial movies.

Moreover, by mid 1960s the theater owners became powerful enough to form a distribution monopoly to control the screening of films. Consider the case of Samuel Khachikian, an Armenian-Iranian director and a celebrated crime-drama filmmaker who was a key contributor to film noir in Iran, [35] directing films such as *Storm in our City* [Toofan dar shahr-e ma] (1958), *Panic* [Delhoreh] (1962), *The Strike* [Zarbat] (1964), *Delirium* [Sarsam] (1965). In a book-length interview Khachikian described the harmful effects of the distribution monopoly. For instance, Misaghyeh studio ran by a Baha'i-Iranian named Misaghyeh. Misaghyeh did not want Khachikian to become independent from his studio, and thus deliberately sabotaged the making, screening and distribution of his films. Alongside film production, Misaghyeh ran a distribution company which dubbed and distributed nearly 30 to 40 films a year inside Iran. Therefore, he could easily make up for a possible loss in the box office.

In making *Revolt* [Osyan] (1966) Khachikian was given a script adapted from an U.S. film recently screened in Iran. Despite the fact that he himself had written many scripts, he had to follow studio owners' preference and desire. To compensate, he worked on the script of *Revolt* and from a dull adaptation changed it to a lively Iranian drama. However, his most distinct contribution to Iranian filmmaking always lay in his style of editing as he tended to delete extra shots and to create a fast pace of moving shots based on his mobile camera movements. In making *Revolt*, he and Misaghyeh shared the production cost so that they could split the profit in half, yet as the events unfolded Misaghyeh did not want him to profit.

Misaghiyeh deliberately screened *Revolt* in the worst season—during schools' and universities' exams. A week later when audience gradually turned up, the studio stopped the screening with an excuse was that the film was not selling well. Misaghiyeh pretended to Khachikian that he was bankrupt and asked the director to withdraw from the contract. Instead of fifty thousand Toman, Khachikian got only fifteen thousand Toman, just one fifth of his share in the contract. The issue seemed finished. However, later Khachikian realized that when the film was dubbed in Pakistan and did extremely at the box office, he could do nothing.[36]

In another instance, Khachikian managed to make an independent film himself and gave it to Sierra Film studio for distribution. After a couple of weeks audience gradually started to appear in the cinema, yet the company announced a very low turnout. In a month when the audience poured into the cinema, the distribution strategy in the group of fifteen cinemas that Sierra Studio followed was to sell the sold tickets of an Indian film screened just before Khachikian's. They sustained this strategy for a week and then they stopped screening the film claiming that it was not selling. In this way, the film could not even return its starting capital. Khachikian had to quite independent filmmaking and continued working with other film studios on their terms and conditions.[37]

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| <p>Khachikian preferred to make melodrama,s yet studio owners wanted crime-drama and trailers. He made some of the early films in this genre such as <i>The Strike</i>. Through lighting he emphasised the loneliness and vulnerability of characters in a growing industrial society.</p> | <p>In <i>The Strike</i> characters' everyday mundane activities of such as hand washing become suspicious. People's true intentions are not easily deciphered. To watch the film, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVQm-7Bj4Ak</p> |
|  |  |
| <p>Gradually viewers cannot tell the difference between day and night in the film. The characters descend into instability and violence, while reality becomes nightmarish.</p> | <p>In the world of Khachikian's crime drama, a handful of spaces remain safe, pure and trustworthy. Workshops, factories, offices, streets, gardens, bedrooms, kitchens, etc. could be infected with traces of violence and crime. His films highlight a world with a few refuges.</p> |

Although the category of First Cinema production in Iran was not completely similar to its global counterpart in the 1960s, it went through various stages during the aforementioned decades in Iran and its infrastructure and working pattern drastically changed. This consequently affected the film text. During the 1970s progressive themes gradually disappeared and cheap imitations of Indian, Hong Kong and Spaghetti Westerns got developed. As Sadr indicated, themes of physical fights, violence and revenge increased and obsessions with the female body grew:

“The full dehumanization of woman in commercial Iranian films occurred in the 1970s ... most of these films were outlandish, sexually charged cocktails of voyeurism, performance and prostitution.” [38]

Iran began producing Second Cinema films along with the consolidation of First Cinema productions from the mid 1960s on. Notably, *Mudbrick and Mirror* [Xesht o Ayne] (1965, dir Golestan) was a low budget film directed and produced in Golestan's private workshop. In this field the private sector was active and many producers and studios of mainstream cinema participated in making Second Cinema productions. For instance, Parviz Sayyad, who directed and acted in the Samad popular comic series, was the producer and the lead actor of the internationally praised *Far From Home* [*Dar Qorbat*] (1975, dir Sohrab Shahid-Sales). Sayyad mentioned that he invested the benefits of the sale of the Samad comic films in Second Cinema films such as *Still Life* (1974) which won the Silver Bear Prize in the 24th Berlin International Film Festival. This type of cinema was developed mainly by filmmakers who graduated from western universities and film institutes, people such as Parviz Kimiavi and Daryoush Mehrjouyi, and their work consequently was received enthusiastically by upper middle class audiences and elite film critics who were often highly educated. Iranian art house films transformed cinematic language and form; however, they could not attract a masses audience. This made their production financially unstable, as the failure of *Sattar Khan* (1972, dir Ali Hatami) in the box office demonstrated—another Second Cinema film produced by Sayyad, which nearly bankrupted him.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The grey and gloomy horizon of the industrial city early in the morning. To watch *Circle* see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOblrEoDVq8>

It was during the 1970s that the so-called Iranian New-Wave filmmakers appeared who developed a new vision of politics, society and culture in Iranian cinema. In their critical approach toward collective issues, some of the films even come close to the radical practices of Third Cinema filmmakers. In *Circle* (1973, dir Daryoush Mehrjouyi) the narrative follows the journey of an old ill man and his young son Ali from village to industrial city as the father is hospitalized. They have a life-transforming journey into the decadent heart of the industrial city and the hospital as its epitome.



Addicts are rounded up by blood-buyers and sent to their center. (*Circle*)



The main room in the center, where the blood is taken from the addicts.



Ali gives blood, and he makes friend with the members of the gang.



Ali gets involved with the hospital workers and joins them in their trip to other industrial centers, here a chicken farm.

The film highlights the corrupt interactions around the institution of the hospital and primarily concentrates on a profit-seeking gang and their practice of selling blood of addicts to the hospital. The film demonstrates a high level of social commitment provoking social consciousness about a horrific socio-medical issue.



In the farm they see how chickens are thrown into a ditch and killed so that their price will increase in the market. It is a scene with multi-layered signification and could allude to the victimization of innocent people in the industrial environment.

Ali is gradually drawn into other crimes connected to misuse of hospital resources. The hospital's cook gives Ali food from the hospital to sell in the slums. Here, Ali finds new clients for the blood buyers.



Ali picks up two addicts who have a rare blood type and takes their blood on the way to hospital. In this way Ali proves his capabilities within the gang.



Ali joins in business with the chief blood-buyer. Here the circle is complete—the victim becomes the exploiter.

However, at the level of production and distribution we cannot find any traces of such an affinity with Third Cinema. The film was jointly produced by TelFilm, Ministry of Culture and Art (MCA), Progressive Filmmakers' Cooperative (PFC) and Film Industry Development Corporation of Iran (FIDCI). These institutes represented the state in the realm of media and were run by relatives of Pahlavi family. TelFilm was a subsidiary company of National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) whose director general was Reza Ghotbi, the queen's cousin. The company participated in making quality feature films, many of New-Wave movies, also coproduction with foreign film companies, serial productions and TV documentaries. The MCA was headed by Shah's brother-in-law, Mehrdad Pahlbod. The FIDCI was headed by Mehdi Boushehri the husband of Shah's twin sister Ashraf. This company participated in film corporations which engaged with international interests.

"This long tenures at their institutions helped ensure regularity and continuity not only in organizational and managerial formations of cinema and television but also in the textual and authorial formations of film and television programs in both nonfiction and fiction form. These individuals and their organizations formed part of the Shah's inner circle of power, and they contributed greatly to his political consolidation." [39]

[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Considering the production process, it is doubtful that *Circle* had radical commitments at its core. These modern state institutions were in cooperation with international film companies and wanted to produce films akin to international festival's preferences. However, despite all their powers, *Circle* was banned for three years and was only screened in 1979. One could question why Mehrjouyi did not experiment with alternative forms of distribution. He could have set up screening sessions for people in hospitals, workshops and universities. Yet, he did not go through that path as it seems that he preferred to screen his work for a general middle class audience. In a book-length interview, he remembered that dark period and stated that the three year ban had such a destructive effect on him that he fell into depression and decided to change the path of his filmmaking altogether. At the time he could have made several other critical films about social issues but the ban put an end into it. [40]

Another unfortunate example which could highlight why New-Wave filmmaker



Tangsir film poster accentuates the individuality of the hero rather than drawing attention to the collective roots of his power. To watch *Tangsir*, visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_Zblp6qSto



In a defining early chapter in Choubak's novel, *Tangsir*, Zar-Mohammad tames an angry cow. With mythical, ritual and artistic connotations, the violent scene multiplies textual meanings. Reminding viewers of the ancient Iranian divinity Mithra/mehr who sacrificed a cow to announce a new beginning, the novel endows the hero with the attributes of a legend who establishes a new order. In contrast, the film fails to incorporate the novel's connotations and the scene is reduced to something like a bullfight.



Mehr/Mithra's sacrifice. In the first, the lion is the symbol of Mehr in ancient Iran. In the next, we can see a Roman visualization of Mithra's

could not break the hierarchy of command and professionalism is the case of the production process of *Tangsir* (1974, dir Amir Naderi). *Tangsir* is originally a short novel by Sadegh Choubak[41] that narrates the transformation of a real common man named Zar-Mohammad who lived in the beginning of the twentieth century in Iran into a popular legend. He fought the injustices of the ruling class in his southern hometown Boushehr on the shore of Persian Gulf. When the life-long savings of Zar-Mohammad, the simple worker and city porter, is expropriated by a greedy merchant, clergy men, and a politician, Zar-Mohammad attempts to resolve the issue through compromise and dialogue, all in vain. The level of public humiliation surpasses his desire for peaceful resolution, to the extent that he embarks on a mission to deliver justice himself. The string of assassinations he commits are welcomed by the residents of Boushehr who praise him in public and help him and his family to escape from the police. Finally a wave of a popular revolt embraces the city.

The short novel offers a wonderful capacity to develop Third Cinema ideas about the awakening of people and collective radicalization, yet the film fails to develop a script in that direction. As I will discuss, the main reason lies in its problematic production process. Ali Abbasi the owner of Payam Film Studio bought the novel's copyright from Choubak, and Amir Naderi went with the crew to Boushehr for initial preparation. Naderi did not solely rely on the text but started to find people who had seen the real Zar-Mohammad and remembered the events. He broke down the order of command as the director and worked collectively with the local workers on the set while trying to listen and gather witnesses' opinions. He even refused to stay in a hotel reserved for him and other professionals. Instead he stayed in the same house as the other workers on the project. Abbasi recalled that Naderi demonstrated a high level of integrity in the project, breaking down the professional barriers. However, Naderi did not predict that his progressive actions would never be delivered in a production sponsored by the private sector and controlled by celebrities coming from Tehran. In fact, Abbasi hired the superstar of Iranian cinema at the time, Behrouz Vosoughi, to act as Zar-Mohammad. The star then had conditions for doing the film, one of which was that he would only work on his personal terms, meaning that the director had to follow Vosoughi's desire. In this way, the celebrity took over the place that Naderi hoped to democratically transform into progressive filmmaking practices.

Tangsir was basically a story of the emergence of a real legend, yet the film was unable to reflect the mythical dimension of the story mainly because it stuck to Hollywood norms of realistic codes of representation. For a director who made *Runner* (1983) a couple of years after, through which the everyday struggles of a child shaped a distinct cinematic experience, *Tangsir* was a rather disappointing film. As Solanas and Getino stated:

"The possibility of discovering and inventing film forms and structures that serve a more profound vision of our reality resides in the ability to place oneself on the outside limits of the familiar, to make one's way amid constant dangers." [42]

That imaginative undertaking was what *Tangsir* was unable to achieve. I argue that that as can be interpreted from actor Vosoughi's memoir, the problem lies in the fact that he did not let director Naderi work freely and creatively. Naderi intended to take shots from all angles yet Vosoughi would not comply. Vosoughi even phoned Abbasi and asked him to replace the director with another person. The issue was resolved only when Vosoughi accepted that Nemat Haghighi the cameraman takes over the complete responsibility of shooting the scenes and there would be no more of multiple shots of a single scene. In this way they imposed their style of filmmaking on Naderi.[43]

sacrifice.



In *Tangsir*, Zar-Mohammad is repeatedly humiliated in public by the merchant and his allies.



Instead of highlighting a connection between the central character and the collective power of people, the film emphasizes Zar-Mohammad's loneliness.



The baker in Bushehr tells him that he is not alone and that the merchant confiscated other people's money too.



Zar-Mohammad's interior monologue in the novel is changed to a soliloquy that he mumbles in the film. In this way the film is burdened with too many words, rather than use creative cinematic devices such as editing and lighting.

The presence of the star Vosoughi disturbed the progressive practices that Naderi initiated. Instead of the crew's hotel, Vosoughi stayed in a high ranking military residence, invited by a general who was his friend. Vosoughi was even taken by a military helicopter to the film set and fetched afterwards. In his memoir Vosoughi defended his decision to separate himself from the group as he preferred to stay with military friends not the film crew. [44] [45] We can observe how the imperatives of a private film studio determined the production process of a film that otherwise could have become a notable Third Cinema exercise.



Tangsir excessively uses close ups to depict the inner world of Zar-Mohammad. These emphasize the figure of the celebrity actor and accentuate his individualistic motives, as if he were after personal revenge. In contrast, the novel highlights the desire for collective justice.



After the second assassination Zar-Mohammad meets a spontaneous crowd in the street who chant in his support: "Shir [lion]-Mohammad!"



At the visual level the film cannot connect the supporters with their hero but makes the people seem separated from the central character.

It was also the state who supported Second Cinema. The main consistent supporter of Second Cinema productions—mainly color documentaries about the fine arts, architecture, archeology and the performing arts—remained the state, which through MCA and NIRT participated in the limited productions and distribution of documentary films. The MCA chief, Pahlbod, stated that both internal and external market for such documentaries existed, including the Iranian embassies in foreign countries, lending them to foreign schools and universities.[46] As the directors of such films despised commercial cinema, they chose MCA as their alternative supporter. People such as Houshang Shafti and Manouchehr Tayyab made more than ten films about art and crafts in that period.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Hegemonic resistance to Third Cinema



Tangsir, like mainstream cinema of the 1970s, presents explicit physical violence.



One of the disappointments of *Tangsir* is that it fails to depict with meaningful visual significance the revolting people who help Zar-Mohammad escape. They seem more like a confused mob without direction.

Unlike First and Second Cinema films, it is difficult to find Third Cinema productions in the pre-1979 Iranian cinema. During the 1970s several attempts were made to produce political films that aimed to break through the conformist and stereotypical representations of society, films that attempted to convey revolutionary messages to awaken people. Yet, considering the film texts themselves, I question whether they could be categorized as Third Cinema productions. Perhaps, the severe censorship of the Pahlavi regime was a central reason. At the time, some of the conditions for banning entire films or portions of films were these:[47] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

- Opposition to constitutional monarchy and insulting the person of Shah or the royal family
- Showing political revolutions anywhere in the world that lead to removal of constitutional regimes
- Inciting revolution or uprising against the government or against the monarchic regime
- Propagandizing in favor of any ideology or belief that is illegal in the country
- Letting murderers, criminals, or robbers who commit homicide go unpunished
- Provoking workers, students, peasants, and other social strata to fight the security forces and to destroy or set fire to factories and educational institutions
- Promoting moral corruption, public immodesty, and revealing secrets of gangsterism

This list of conditions provided the Exhibition Committee[48] (Komite-ye Namayesh) in charge of censorship the opportunity to entirely or partly ban a film according to their interpretation. Such an atmosphere reduced the possibility of making a socially critical or a political film not susceptible to censorship. When such films were made, the characteristics of Third Cinema at the level of the film text itself practically disappeared. For example, considering the markers of Third Cinema I discussed earlier, the Iranian productions mostly avoided historicizing. Usually a viewer did not know where exactly the setting of the narration was or when it happened. Any indication of historical periods, political regime, their administrative government and the state in general were obscured. Also the films did not bring up questions of the social and political structure. Mystification and anti-historical approaches were common because artists aspired to make films generalizable to all human conditions and not specific to one. The critical films of the time such as *The Circle* were preoccupied with the effects of social injustices and not the causes.

Also, a democratic production model was not taken up by Iranian directors. Solana and Getino believed that in a Third Cinema working model,

“... (e)ach member of the group should be familiar, at least in a general way, with the equipment being used: he must be prepared to replace another in any of the phases of production. The myth of irreplaceable technician must be exploded.”[49]

Most of the Iranian filmmakers were not interested in new, more democratic forms of mediamaking and reception:

- questioning the established hierarchies,
- going beyond the professional division of labor,
- bringing ordinary people to participate
- using their feedbacks and comments.

Iran's critical socio-political films produced at the time were not made collectively. Instead New-Wave filmmakers sought *to represent* people according to a director's individual artistic criteria. The trace of such mentality could be found in liberal filmmakers' statements. For example, in July 1973 they formed the Progressive Filmmakers' Cooperative (PFC) in Tehran. The group which consisted of nineteen well-known producers, directors, cinematographers, composers and actors appeared in a news conference and announced that they resigned from the National Syndicate of Film Industry.[50] In their manifesto, the rebellious members of cooperative announced that they gathered to create a new cinema against the commercial cinema which was "worthy of our culture and nationality," and they intended to use all possible and available funds to bypass the distribution monopoly of the commercial sector.[51] They desired to provide the spectators with "the right to choose" between the commercial cinema and its alternative.[52] However, this right was not to be shaped collectively as they aimed to make films that "while *representing*[53] *our* culture, national characteristics, and artistic growth, could also earn the country some foreign exchange." [54] From the start their intention was to somehow *mediate* between the masses and the spectators. If Third Cinema intended to "problematizes the film worker and breaks down the intellectual aristocracy that the bourgeoisie grants to its followers," [55] the Iranian New-Wave filmmakers avoided the challenge.

Indeed, in this essay I do not ignore exceptional films such as the documentary films made by Kamran Shirdel—which Naficy calls "protest documentaries":

"These films used direct and confrontational strategies in terms of the choice of the subject matter and the critical juxtapositions and politicized contrapuntalism of verbal and visual elements, which pitted official pronouncements against popular opinions." [56]

Images from *Tehran Is the Capital of Iran*:



Shirdel's films such as *Women's Prison [Zendan-e Zanan]* (1965), *Qaleh* (1965-1980), *Tehran is the Capital of Iran [Tehran paytakht-e Iran ast]* (1966-1980) and his most well-known film *The Night that It Rained [Oon Shab ke Baroon Oomad]* (1967-1974) were all produced by the MCA, yet the ministry confiscated the films, banned them and until 1979 revolution they were not publicly screened. In my interview with Shirdel,[57] he mentioned that at the time film equipment was limited to either the state and its apparatuses such as MCA, or the private section. And in order to use MCA equipment, he had to pretend that he complied with their demands. In this way Shirdel pretended that he was making a film about the enhancement of living conditions for sex workers in Tehran's notorious red light district, Qaleh, while he was in fact investigating their inhumane working conditions. The ministry even sent a police officer with him to the setting of *Tehran the Capital of Iran* where he shot his film in the south of Tehran near a brickmaking factory. He filmed the difficult living conditions of families:



Shirdel in his documentaries did not follow the “objective” approach common among his contemporaries in Iran. He constructed subjective approaches since he found mere objectivity unable to offer a complete picture of reality. In *Tehran Is the Capital of Iran* he juxtaposes scenes of poverty in the south of city with the voices of officials who preach the government line and praise Pahlavi’s achievements. To watch the short film please visit https://www.ubu.com/film/shirdel_tehran.html



In *Tehran Is the Capital of Iran*, the voice of the secretary of Women’s Organization speaks as if poor city infrastructure no longer exists, yet the camera reveals another reality.

- young children without parents,
- lack of clean water,
- lack of proper school for children,
- sedimentation of the soot from a factory in the residential neighborhood,
- unemployed workers searching through garbage to find something sellable, etc.

Shirdel managed to divert authorities’ attention as if he were making a film about the achievements of Pahlavi’s economic reforms. Therefore, one might consider Shirdel’s documentaries as guerilla cinema.[58] However, even critical, political and revolutionary films such as Shirdel’s were not collectively made. Perhaps that was because MCA assigned him a professional crew who were in fact civil servants of the ministry and he could not share his radical intentions with them. Also, we should bear in mind that unlike some of Latin American Third Cinema films which were sponsored by trade unions and workers’ support, in Iran this possibility did not exist. For example, we know that the screening in Argentina of *La Hora de los Hornos* took place with the assistance of the Confederation General de Trabajo, known as CGT, which was one of the two national federation of unions. This federation which was recognized as the most radical and combative one, opposed the dictatorship of General Onganía. Also, other supportive worker organizations were in contact with political and intellectual groups and students movements.[59]

In Latin America, autonomous social formations mediated between filmmakers and workers, and they supported the making and exhibition of Third Cinema films. In contrast, in Iran the Shah’s autocratic regime did not allow the establishment of independent labor unions. The 1940s is often cited as the most active and influential decade of Iranian unions who supported Toudeh (socialist) party and fully backed Prime Minister Mossadegh. However, after the 1953 coup the government destroyed the trade unions organized by the Toudeh party and attempted to form non-political unions.[60]

“Officially approved labour unions were reduced to a handful and led by individuals who often had no previous connection with labour.”[61]

An officer from the U.S. embassy in Iran reported on the condition of post-coup unions in this way:

“[Unions] bear only a slight resemblance to the organizations in Western countries. They must operate under government and management restrictions and suspicious that make almost any functioning at all practically impossible.”[62]

In this condition no genuine labor union ran by an autonomous representative of workers existed. In their absence the artists and filmmakers could not connect themselves to the workers through their organizations as happened in Latin America.

Nonetheless, If we bear in mind that during the late sixties and the entire seventies Iranian society experienced social, economic and political turmoil, that even a number of armed Leftist guerrilla groups emerged which advocated radical changes, a question arises: How could cinema as a medium for modern collective enunciation and a powerful hegemonic force-field remained detached? And what social, cultural and historical factors supported such avoidance?

If we put aside the exceptional attempts by few directors such as Shirdel,[63] the unanswered question still lingers: What sustained the hegemonic hierarchical



It is a pity that Shirdel could not interview the inhabitants of the southern neighborhoods; the secretary represented them. Although a few spoke, we are left with an impression that the inhabitants' voices are missing.

relations in the pre-1979 cinema industry? Here, I briefly engage with a hypothesis about the hegemonic factors that obstructed the development of Iran's Third Cinema. First, most of the Third Cinema filmmakers come from countries such as Argentina (Solanas and Getino), Bolivia (Sanjines), Cuba (Alea and Espinosa), Senegal (Sembene) which had experienced colonialization and later liberation into a republic. In that process, the political system of these countries denounced royal and aristocratic social hierarchies that had formed the uneven and unjustified distribution of wealth and capital. Although, the filmmakers assumed that the process of liberation from imperialism was incomplete, they saw their works as the continuation of such a grand national project to de-colonize the culture. What is important here is the mentality of cultural workers, artists and intellectuals: they observed radical democracy as not only valuable but also possible and accessible within the reach of their generation. In an autocratic royal system such as Iran's pre-1979 revolution, the hierarchies of power, wealth and capital might have been undesirable yet they were often deemed as inevitable or unresolvable. Thus the majority of filmmakers did not attempt to break down the hierarchies of command and professional aristocracy in their specific field—here cinema. They were more interested in *mediating* between the gaps within the hierarchy and *representing* the masses to others on their own formal and aesthetic terms rather than in forming a collective.

This attitude can be observed in many memoirs by and interviews with the filmmakers. What is notable is that many of the filmmakers came from distinguished and sophisticated backgrounds, often upper-middle class. And shockingly, they often praise past social system without a critical eye. Either they could afford studying in the western universities or were affiliated with artistic circles and film clubs in the capital—institutions which praised and promoted modern western professionalism and standards.[64] The dominant mentality of the bourgeoisie in the cinematic circles were far from political trajectory of radical filmmakers in Latin America. We know that Getino was a white-collar worker in the metal industry by the end of 1950s. His union militancy was strengthened as he became a member of a pro-Peronist Trotskyist group in the early 1960s. Solanas was involved with the cultural activities of Argentina's Communist party. Both distanced themselves from the Left towards Peronism in the 1960s as it became the radical nationalizing popular force in the country. They did not normalize their intellectual middle class background and actively broke away from their comfortable privileged position towards radical democracy in their filmmaking practices.[65]

Nonetheless, the social and political turmoil of 1970s in Iran nourished radical tendencies in the emergent urban working and middle class that geared up towards the events of 1979. Then came small radical groups such as Tabriz circle[66] which attempted to break through the hegemonic hierarchies. Yet, we cannot find the trace of any formation of cinematic collectives such as *Cine Liberación* of Argentina in Iran. To understand this situation, it is illuminating to compare the Iranian condition with the condition of Southern intellectuals in Italy as viewed by Gramsci. He believed that in the South the problem of disconnection between the subaltern and the intellectuals lay in the fact that there was no “organization of middle culture” which could connect the two:

“There [in Italy] exists in the South the Laterza Publishing House, and the review *La Critica*. There exists academics and cultural bodies of the great erudition. But there do not exist small or medium sizes reviews, nor publishing houses around which medium groupings of Southern intellectuals might form. The Southerners who have sought to leave the agrarian block and pose the Southern question in a radical form have found hospitality in, and grouped themselves around, reviews printed outside the South.”[67]

Gramsci believed that for building up revolutionary hegemonic relations, the formation of medium and middle centers between the elites and the subaltern were crucial. This was a role that popular novel played in France and Gramsci hoped that new popular art could take up such a political significance in Italy.[68]

Therefore, we could conclude that the hegemonic resistance to Third Cinema within the Iranian cinema industry and the lack of revolutionary collectives could be related to the lack of medium-sized associations and groups within the socio-political sphere. The filmmakers and intellectuals were either dependent on the commercial sector or the large statist institutes such as MCA and NIRT.

Does this conclusion mean that modern media had no place in the radicalization of the Iranian people during the 1970s? We could look for other media which played a significant role. The audiocassette

“was potentially a two-way, grass-roots medium, reusable, durable, portable, and inexpensive. The production and distribution of cassettes was not centralized. Their reception was flexible and cheap.”[69]

I spoke to people who were young radicals during the 1970s[70] and they stated that in their group visits to places such as Qaleh and slums of industrial cities, they would take an audiocassette recorder and record their interviews with the inhabitants. Thus, we could think that possibly many independent groups used the newly arrived audiocassette technology for radical means. As Michel Foucault rightly observed in his trip to Iran in 1978 it had become “the tool *par excellence* of counterinformation.”[71] Another radical modern medium was photography. In the personal albums of people taken from the 1960s and 1970s, photos traced underdevelopment. Also, many instances of the revolution were registered by amateur photographers whose practice broke the professional hierarchy in the field in order to produce historical documents. We could assume that what was avoided by cinema was taken up by audiocassette and photography.

Conclusion

In this essay I examined the pre-1979 Iranian cinema industry according to the categories of First, Second and Third Cinema. As the lack of democratic practices had devastating consequences for the less fortunate people in the industry, I posed the question whether Iranian filmmakers ever attempted to pursue progressive and democratic models of revolutionary collectives. First, I demonstrated that First cinema as defined by the theorists, in fact, existed in Iran. As it became apparent that media was a promising field for the accumulation of capital, many small commercial studios were founded and those who survived the fluctuation of the market gradually interfered with the production process and together shaped a monopoly of distribution. Then I discussed that Second Cinema also began to grow through the assistance of the state and its institutes which supported art house productions and documentaries. Through foreign distributions in festivals, universities and cultural centers they provided an international market. I also demonstrated that despite the fact that some of Second Cinema films by New-Wave filmmakers had the potential to engage with radical progressive practices, a problematic production process (as in *Tangis*) or distribution channel (as in *the Circle*) impeded such directions.

Finally, I examined the hegemonic social relations that sustained the aristocracy of professionalism in the industry. I speculated that while the elite of cinema were content to simply *represent* the people, instead of seeking new connections with them, the lack of middle-sized cultural centers backed by labor unions, students and progressive intellectuals obstructed the formation of Third Cinema collectives

as appeared in Latin America. In this way, this essay provided some explanation considering why revolutionary cinematic collectives did not emerged in a country that went through such a radical event as the 1979 revolution. The struggles to form democratic collectives after the revolution have continued until the present day and have gone through various stages and forms as the hegemonic force-fields became transformed inside the Islamic Republic of Iran. It requires another essay to examine the achievements and failures of the post-1979 cinema.

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Notes

1. Robert Stam, *Film Theory; An Introduction*, Blackwell: Oxford, 2000, p 93.
[\[return to page 1\]](#)
2. Stam, *Film Theory*, *ibid*, p 100.
3. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Routledge: London, 2014, p 148.
4. Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, *ibid*, p 250.
5. Stam, *Film Theory*, *Op cit*, p 99.
6. Mike Wayne, *Political Film; the Dialectics of Third Cinema*, Pluto Press: London, 2001, p. 1.
7. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema; Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World" in *New Latin American Cinema*, (ed) Michael T.Martin, Wayne State University Press: Detroit, 1997, p. 33.
8. Mike Wayne, "Dialectics of Third Cinema" in *The Routledge Companion to Film and Politics* (eds) Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis, Routledge: New York, p.20.
9. Wayne, "Dialectics of Third Cinema," *ibid*, p. 21.
10. Wayne, *Political Film; The Dialectics of Third Cinema*, *Op cit*, p. 53
11. Wayne, *Political Film; The Dialectics of Third Cinema*, *ibid*, p. 91.
12. Wayne, *Political Film; The Dialectics of Third Cinema*, *ibid*, p. 10.
13. Solanas and Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema; Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation, *Op cit*, p. 37.
14. Wayne, *Political Film; The Dialectics of Third Cinema*, *Op cit*, p. 14-22.
15. Fernando Birri, "For a Nationalist, Realist, Critical and Popular Cinema" in *New Latin American Cinema*, *Op cit*, p. 96.
16. Octavio Getino, "Some Notes on the Concept of a "Third Cinema"" in *ibid*, p. 100.
17. Wayne, *Political Film; The Dialectics of Third Cinema*, *Op cit*, p. 46.
18. Wayne, "Dialectics of Third Cinema," *Op cit*, p. 20.
19. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History; An Introduction*, University of Wisconsin: madison, 2003, p 537. [\[return to page 2\]](#)

20. For more information please see Mooz-e Ebrat-e Iran; ed, *Moosad be Ravayat-e Savak*, Mooze Ebrat: Tehran, 2009.
21. "Tarikh be Ravayat-e Pasolini" [History as narrated by Pasolini] in *Film va Honar*, 1973, No 446.
22. Stam, *Film Theory*, Op cit, p 281.
23. Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Op cit, p 286.
24. Forth World people refers to "the still-residing descendants of the original inhabitants of territories subsequently taken over or circumscribed by alien conquest or settlement." It is estimated that in contemporary world nearly 3000 native nations exist which account to 250 million people within 200 states. Stam, *Film Theory*, Ibid, p 283.
25. Stam, *Film Theory*, ibid, p. 284.
26. Paul Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections" in *Questions of Third Cinema*, (ed) Willemen, British Film Institute: London, 1991, p, 1, 2.
27. Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question,"ibid, p. 14.
28. Shahbazi, A, *Yek Roustayi Dar Lale-Zar; Panjah Sal Xaterat Sinami Ayyob Shahbazi [A villager in Lale-Zar; Fifty years of Ayyob Shahbazi] Cinematic Memoir*, Rozane-Kar Press: Tehran, 2012, p. 211.
29. Shahbazi, A, *Yek Roustayi Dar Lale-Zar; Panjah Sal Xaterat Sinami Ayyob Shahbazi [A villager in Lale-Zar; Fifty years of Ayyob Shahbazi] Cinematic Memoir*, ibid, p.125-209.
30. Shahbazi, A, *Yek Roustayi Dar Lale-Zar; Panjah Sal Xaterat Sinami Ayyob Shahbazi [A villager in Lale-Zar; Fifty years of Ayyob Shahbazi] Cinematic Memoir*, ibid, p. 204.
31. Shahbazi, A, *Yek Roustayi Dar Lale-Zar; Panjah Sal Xaterat Sinami Ayyob Shahbazi [A villager in Lale-Zar; Fifty years of Ayyob Shahbazi] Cinematic Memoir*, ibid, p. 205.
32. Shahbazi, A, *Yek Roustayi Dar Lale-Zar; Panjah Sal Xaterat Sinami Ayyob Shahbazi [A villager in Lale-Zar; Fifty years of Ayyob Shahbazi] Cinematic Memoir*, ibid, p. 209.
33. For more information on this subject please see "White Revolution on the Screen; The Transformation of Hegemonic Currents in the Iranian Rural Films during the 1960s and 1970s, Sadeghi-Esfahlani, A, in British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2020.1751065 [**give URL, not DOI**]
34. Ali Abbasi was a young film producer during the 1970s who collaborated with young artists and filmmakers. He was also the chair of syndicate of film producers in the 1970s and had firsthand experience of the struggle with both the state and the commercial sector. I interviewed him in 2014 about his career before 1979.
35. Hamid Naficy, *A social History of Iranian Cinema: The Industrializing Years 1941-1978*, Vol 2, Duke University Press: Durham, 2011, p. 153.
36. *Parvande yek Jenayi-Saz: Esmaeel Khachikian [the Case of a Crime-Drama Filmmaker]*, (ed) Baharlou, A Ghatre: Tehran, 2016, p. 88, 95.

37. *Parvande yek Jenayi-Saz: Esmaeel Khachikian [the Case of a Crime-Darama Filmmaker]*, *ibid*, p. 114.

38. Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema; a Political History*, I.B.TAURIS: London, 2006, p150. For more on the topics of physical violence and body obsessions see p. 136-157.

39. Naficy, *A social History of Iranian Cinema*, Op cit, p. 70. [[return to p. 3](#)]

40. *Mehrjouyi: Karname Chehel Sal-e [Mehrjouyi: Forty Years of Filmmaking]*, ed Many Haghighi, Markaz: Tehran, 2013, p. 65-66.

41. Sadegh Choubak (1916-1998) was a famous Iranian novelist and fiction writer. Often described as a naturalist, in his work he paid particular attention to his contemporary social issues and wrote about people in south of Iran.

42. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema," Op cit, p. 48.

43. Behrouz Vosoughi, *Behrouz Vosoughi; A biography*, Aran Press: San Francisco, 2004, p. 227-9.

44. Vosoughi, *Behrouz Vosoughi*, *ibid*, p. 230.

45. The fact that Vosoughi was so close to military officers reveals his political stance which might require illumination. In Iran where the country was ran by the military dictatorship of First Pahlavi, having personal relations with the army officers signified dedication to ruling elites. Considering the fact that the Second Pahlavi overthrew democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadegh through an American-backed military coup in 1953, we can also decipher that Vosoughi was probably a supporter of the second Pahlavi regime and the coup government.

46. Naficy, *A social History of Iranian Cinema*, Op cit, p. 92-3.

47. Naficy, *A social History of Iranian Cinema*, *ibid*, p 185. [[return to p. 4](#)]

48. The committee included representatives of the Ministry of the Interior, of the MCA, of the National Police, of NIRT, of Savak (National Security and information Organization) and of the film exhibition industry. Naficy, *A social History of Iranian Cinema: The Industrializing Years 1941-1978*, *ibid*, p. 184.

49. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema," Op cit, p. 50.

50. All the people involved in the production of films were required to join this organization which was dominated by the private-sector.

51. Naficy, *A social History of Iranian Cinema*, Op cit, p. 353.

52. Naficy, *A social History of Iranian Cinema*, *ibid*, p. 354.

53. Emphasized by me.

54. Naficy, *A social History of Iranian Cinema*, *ibid*, p 354.

55. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema," Op cit, p. 50.

56. Naficy, *A social History of Iranian Cinema*, Op cit, p. 119.

57. I interviewed Shirdel in 2010 about the production process of his radical

documentaries.

58. Guerrilla cinema refers to a particular condition of filmmaking whereby “filmmakers are working in conditions of political danger and state authoritarianism, when their work may be seized, censored or when themselves might be imprisoned, the only way they can film is by using secrecy and subterfuge. In this way their conditions of work are analogous to the guerrilla.” *Inside Pinochet's Prisons* (1974) sets an example, in that a group of East German communist with western passports found their way inside Pinochet's prison pretending to make an anti-communist film while they were documenting the inhuman conditions of communist and socialist inmates. Wayne, *Political Film; the Dialectics of Third Cinema*, Op cit, p. 56-9.

59. Mariano Mestman “Third Cinema; Militant Cinema at the Origins of the Argentinian Experience 1968-1971,”Third Text,
DOI:10.1080/09528822.2011.545609p **[give URL, not DOI]**

60. Habib Lajevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, 1985, p. 201.

61. Lajevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, ibid, p. 203.

62. Lajevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, ibid, p. 202.

63. It is noteworthy that in my interview with Shirdel he stated that he saw himself as someone who belonged to May 68 movement as he was a student at Rome School of Architecture at the time. He used to attend the film club discussions ran by Pier Pasolini and learnt film editing from Francesco Rosi. So it would be more accurate to think that his radical commitments regarding the documentary cinema was formed in that historical context not in interaction with the Iranian condition.

64. To provide evidence for this claim please see Farokh Ghaffari's book-length interview about his life and career in cinema. In Iran he is currently known as the spark of social-realist cinema in Iran with his *South of the City* [Jonoub Shahr] (1958) and *Night of the Hunchback* [Shab-e Quzi] (1964). His impact on the new Iranian cinema is deemed significant since he organized Iran's National Film Archive in 1951 and ran the first film club in Tehran which its weekly screenings and discussion sessions afterwards became an essential hub for the young filmmakers. Considering his background he belonged to a high-ranking diplomat family who served Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties in various European countries. He himself grew up in Belgium and studied Cinema in Paris. Ghaffari's family was a large land-owner in North Tehran and he lived most of his life in a massive Ekhtiariyeh estate he inherited. He stated that the desire for story-telling came from his up-bringing as he had a grandmother whose feet needed to be massaged frequently by the servants and as she did not like silence one servant was always narrating a story. Throughout the interview he did not question the economic and social hierarchy that he grew up in and treated it as something inevitable and almost natural. To read more about his upbringing and his reluctant attitude please see *Roozgar Farokh; Goft-o goo ba Farokh Ghaffari* [Farokh's time; Interview with Farokh Ghaffari], (ed) Nouri, S. Roozbehan: Tehran, 2017.

65. Mario Roca, “La Pelicula de Peron,”in Cine y Liberacion 1, Buenos Aires, 1972. p 42 cited in Mestman, “Third Cinema, Militant Cinema at the Origins of the Argentinian Experience 1968 – 1971, Op cit, p. 36.

66. Tabriz circle [Halghe Tabriz] was commonly applied to a group of young intellectuals and artists who gathered in Tabriz, a North Western city in Iran in the early 1960s. They were from working class families and had radical

communist views. The most famous member was Samad Behrangi who was a teacher in Azerbaijan villages and wrote children's stories based on the experiences of farmer and working class children. He and Behrouz Dehghan collected, edited and translated the folklore stories of Azari people in two volumes which reflected their mentality against socio-political injustices. Among them were active female members such as Marzieh Ahmadi-Oskouyi who was active in student movements and strikes and wrote a number of short stories about the class conflict in Azerbaijan. Notably she composed writings based on their group visits of slums in the outskirts of industrial cities such as Ahvaz. One could observe those pieces as voice-over for documentaries. Despite the promising prospective, the intellectual life of Tabriz circle was a short lived experience; Behrangi was suspiciously drowned in Aras river, Dehghan was killed in torture sessions by SAVAK, Oskouyi was killed in an armed street conflict with SAVAK. The rest of the members were drawn into armed guerilla conflict by the late 1960s. To read more about their artistic and journalistic activities please see *Yadman-e Samad Behrangi [Remembering Samad Behrangi]*, (ed) Ali-Ashraf Darvishian., Mugham: Tabriz, 2016, p. 587- 645.

67. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (eds) Hoare and Nowell Smith, International Publishers Co: New York, 1971, p. 183.

68. Antonio Gramsci, *The Gramsci Reader; Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed Forgacs, New York University Press: New York, 2000, p. 370 -2.

69. Naficy, *A social History of Iranian Cinema*, Op cit, p. 415.

70. Personal conversation in the 1990s.

71. Janet Afrey and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seduction of Islamism*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2005, p. 219.





Stewart Phillip is the Grand Chief of the Union of British Columbia Indians, a leading voice of reason and activism in the fight against Canada's oil and gas industry mega-projects.



Groups working in solidarity with British Columbia and Alberta First Nations have played a much more visible role in Canada since 2015.



Near the end of 2019 a series of militant demonstrations, plus road and rail blockades dominated the national political agenda in Canada. Covid pushed these actions to the sidelines – temporarily.

Wild Archaeology and the changing face of Canadian documentary

by [Peter Steven](#)

The challenge of learning our history

In this time of Covid-19 we hear many big-issue conversations among friends and in the media that take us beyond the immediate crisis and tragedies of the pandemic. Are we living through a major historic event? Will we ever be the same? Does the world sometimes shift radically overnight? In what ways might we return to normal? Because Covid has made inequality more visible, can we find ways to rebuild our societies differently?

These are all understandable, reasonable questions. But in Canada, Covid has temporarily pushed to the margins the most significant development in modern Canadian history. I refer to the rise of Indigenous culture and political power. Because of this growing power, a radical shift in viewing the past and the future was already underway. For the Left specifically, a new challenge has forced itself onto the stage: a reckoning with the history and status of Indigenous peoples. The national momentum has swung away from Quebec independence and hopes that the white working-class will in the short-term transform society.

Of course, the workings of social class, gender, systemic racism, and the environmental crisis continue to demand attention. But the success or failure of Indigenous movements now draws all these issues together. For example, the struggle to halt Western Canada's tar sands with its pipeline mega-projects barreling down through the U.S. and out to the Pacific, major culprits in the global climate crisis, hinges on the leading role played by Indigenous campaigns. Tracy German's *Wild Archaeology* represents the explosion of Indigenous arts and media now underway in Canada and demonstrates a new excitement around the field of Indigenous archaeology. It must be said that Indigenous politics contains multiple strands with myriad perspectives and experiences. Not all First Nations oppose Canada's big energy projects. Grand Chief Stewart Phillip from British Columbia emphasizes the links in all these issues.

"To Indigenous people, it is clearly a life-and-death struggle... But it's not just an Indigenous struggle, it's a struggle of humanity. We need to come together to push back the corporate agenda." [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

That push back is now building rapidly from a growing strength. Naturally, for its part the Canadian government and its corporate partners keep pushing their agenda as well. In late 2020 it was reported that the Trudeau Liberal government had spent \$100 million fighting Indigenous groups in court. [2]

Approximately 2 million Indigenous people live in Canada, accounting for 5% of



One of the most significant recent events in Canada was the release in 2015 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The commission focused on the long, brutal history of Residential Schools. It heard testimony over four years from more than 6,500 persons, mostly Indigenous survivors of the schools.



"Then around 1975, Minamata disease broke out amongst the Indigenous peoples of Canada (Indians) and I went at the urgent request of local volunteers." Noriaki Tsuchimoto, Japanese film director of *Hands Across Polluted Waters*. Environmental racism remains a significant problem in Canada, with some situations going back many decades. For a powerful introduction see *There's Something in the Water* (Page and Daniel, 2019, Netflix).

the total population. Since 2006, that population has grown by 42.5%— more than four times the growth rate of non-Indigenous peoples over the same period. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada forced Canadians to face the history of Indigenous peoples. Its report, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, focused on the Residential School system, which had forced Indigenous youth out of their communities and lasted until the 1990s. The commission authors called this 120-year history "cultural genocide" and made 94 recommendations. During the course of its country-wide hearings and in its final report, which drew considerable media attention, millions of Canadians learned the truth of our past.

The Truth and Reconciliation report became a turning point. For ordinary Canadians, not legislators or bureaucrats, the most challenging recommendations dealt with education.

"Recommendation 62

We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to:

- Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a *mandatory education requirement* for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students.
- Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms." [3]

Those of us in film studies and media education were not overlooked.

"Recommendation 86

We call upon Canadian *journalism programs and media schools to require education* for all students on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools ..." [4]

Changing documentary in Canada

At the age of 76, in 1993, the British historian Eric Hobsbawm gave a speech at the University of London titled, "The present as history," in which he addressed "the problems of how one's own perspective on the past can change as history proceeds." [5] Re-reading that Hobsbawm piece now prompts me to consider how the documentary has changed in Canada and how my perspective about it has evolved.

In my 2019 article for *Jump Cut* that surveyed leftist film distribution in Canada during the 1970s I concluded with a discussion of two documentaries about Indigenous people, *Grassy Narrows* (Hiro Miyamatsu, 1979) and *Hands Across Polluted Waters* (Noriaki Tsuchimoto, 1975). [6] These small but important works drew attention to a nasty health and environmental disaster and thus presented a challenge to Canada. But the films proved startling in another way that directly related to the Canadian media world: they were produced by Japanese and Japanese-Canadian filmmakers. [7] This turned on its head the notion of a cinema for international development, in which those in the West uncovered problems in the 'Third World.' The links between media activists from Japan working together with First Nations in Canada certainly pulled the practice of solidarity (let alone development) into a radically different frame, providing the first glimpse of these issues that combine racism and environmental degradation.

In the 1970s the *Grassy Narrows* films had only received polite



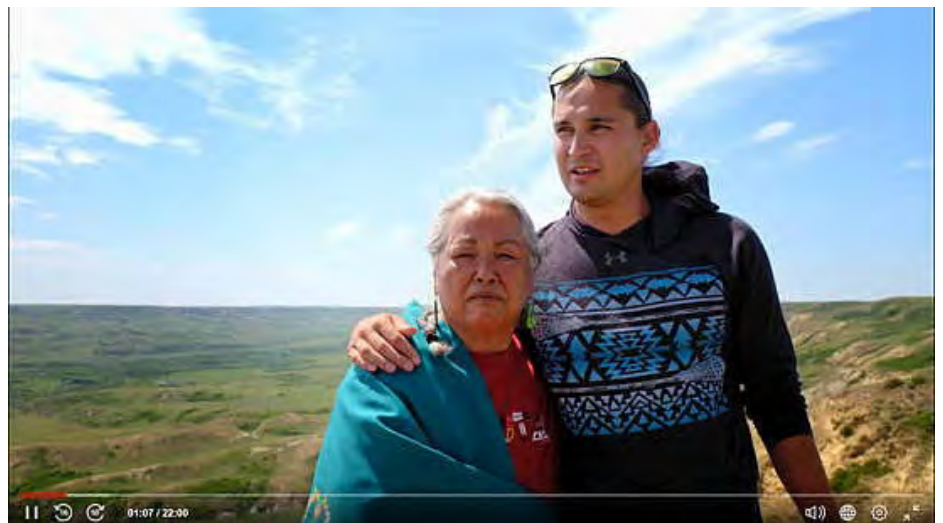
Dr. Rudy Reimer/Yumks Associate Professor of Archaeology at Simon Fraser University acts as chief scientist and host for *Wild Archaeology*. In the first shot of the first episode Reimer outlines his links to the Squamish First Nation. "I've been doing this for 20 years – now it's time to get some of the younger generations involved."

acknowledgement. Today they appear fundamental as part of the movement for Indigenous media into the very centre of Canadian political life. Today it is easy to see the explosion of Indigenous literature, music, theater, film, and media and appreciate its growing power and influence. Within documentary the crucial work of Canada's best-known Indigenous directors, Alanis Obomsawin (*Jordan River Anderson. the Messenger*, 2019) Loretta Sarah Todd (*Kainayssini Imanistaisiwa: The People Go On* (2003), and Zacharius Kunuk (*One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk*, 2019) continues to draw more attention. They have been joined by a younger generation, including *Alethea Arnaquq-Baril*, (*Angry Inuk*, 2016), and in fiction Elle Maija Tailfeathers (*The Body Remembers What the World Broke Open*, 2019), Jeff Barnaby (*Blood Quantum*, 2019) and Tracy Deer (*Beans*, 2020). Their work has been supported by, among others, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network and the ImagiNATIVE festival. [7a]

Wild Archeology

Tracy German's TV series, *Wild Archaeology* (2016-2020) provides another fine example of the growing confidence and stature of Indigenous media. It has received less media attention, but the series provides ample, and powerful evidence of the shifting cultural and political landscape in Canada.

Wild Archaeology is a two-season series created by Tracy German[8] for the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network.[9] German, who is of Haudenosaunee / Dakota ancestry, has spent eight years building the series. Both seasons include 13 episodes, each 22 minutes long. The filmmakers travel to most regions of the country, from BC and the Yukon to Labrador and the high Arctic.



A young man of Dakota/Ojibwe heritage, with long black hair tied back, towers over an elderly woman, his arm wrapped gently around her. They stand on a high outcrop of rock in southern Saskatchewan looking far out across a broad valley to the horizon. He speaks:

"This is my aunt. This is the valley where I was raised and she is a direct descendant of Sitting Bull, who led his followers here after their



The series uses three hosts, Rudy Reimer and his student assistants, Jenifer Brousseau and Jacob Pratt. The genuine relationships among

victory in the Battle of Little Big Horn.”

The man is Jacob Pratt, a host for the series. He, along with the director and two other hosts, exemplify what might be called insider documentary. These are not films made by disinterested reporters or coolly objective anthropologists. This work comes not only with a point of view but from a position within the group being documented.

The strength of the programs becomes obvious with the hosts and on-screen presenters. Dr Rudy Reimer/Yumks is the key figure. He holds the show together and provides the scientific anchor. Reimer, whose Squamish name is Yumks, is an Associate Professor of archaeology at Simon Fraser University and a member of the Squamish First Nation, based near Vancouver. He speaks throughout as a scientific authority but also as an Indigenous insider:

“Much like my ancestors did with ceremony like the potlatch, we

the three and the age difference allows the series to combine education and more youthful exuberance.



Reimer describes the significance of an ancient site in the Central Coast of British Columbia.

always have to give in order to maintain our relationships. I do archaeology as ceremony by doing my best to give back the past to my community.”[10]

Reimer is joined by Jenifer Brousseau an Ojibwe/French experienced actor and singer, from the Serpent River First Nation in Northern Ontario, and Jacob Pratt, also a young actor. He is Dakota/Anishnabe, born and raised in the Cote First Nation in Saskatchewan. As a well-known dancer and flute player, he often performs at international Pow Wows.

This is the set-up. Dr. Rudy, as he is called, performs the role of teacher, while Jenifer and Jacob serve as enthusiastic students, new to the field of archaeology but steeped in their particular Indigenous cultures.

In each episode the team travels out to visit Indigenous communities, all involved in some form of archeological work. Their journeys cover a vast spectrum of communities, cultures, and peoples. Indeed, one of the profound lessons to be learned for anyone watching the series is the incredible variety of Indigenous groups living in Canada. This experience strikes home even to Reimer. He is an accomplished professional scientist and a well-connected activist, but he’s constantly startled and amazed by what he’s learning on the road.[11]



“For us as Indigenous people, Thunderbird is real.”

Reimer brings a political analysis to archaeology. In August 2020 he was asked by a reporter for a local B.C. newspaper to say a few words about his profession:

“The history of the discipline of archaeology is actually quite dark. I don’t want to sound too political here, but it’s very colonial. It’s about the investigation of other peoples’ histories. When we think about how that is done through the excavation, the analysis and interpretation of those materials, it’s very different from what Indigenous people would say.”[12]

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



American Digger represents the most despised form of popular archaeology on TV, a form described by many scientists as one that promotes “object-oriented metal detecting” and glorified looting.



Time Team was one of the best and most popular archaeology series on TV. It featured the actor Tony Robinson as its energetic, avuncular host. Most archaeologists call it an acceptable form of popular education.



Jacob learns about the historic importance of

Digging TV

The many factual formats populating modern TV, including the dizzying forms of Reality TV, shape the viewing experience of *Wild Archaeology*.^[13] Within Reality TV many variations have come and gone—e.g., *Accident and Emergency*, *Docu-soaps*, *Reality games*. But overall, it’s a field of hybrids and some tropes have now influenced more sober sub-genres of science and nature docs. As anthropologist Jaime Ginter from Sheridan College, near Toronto, considers archeology documentary now, he comments:

“There seems to be a range of ‘authentic’ archaeology programming on TV. *Time Team* and *Bone Detectives*, for example, are putting in an honest effort to remain true to the method and theory of the discipline while bringing in some cool shiny stuff that will entice and engage viewers.”^[14] [[open endnotes in new page](#)]

However, even with *Time Team* the lead archaeologist quit in 2012 “citing a change in the program format where there was ‘a lot less archaeological content and a lot more prating about...’^[15] Audiences for these programs can be huge, especially on the National Geographic channels.

“Between June and September 2014, more than 9.5 million viewers tuned in to an episode of *Time Team America*. And in 2014, *Diggers* pulled in more than 31 million viewers.”

Nevertheless, archaeology on TV abounds in stories of ancient aliens, giants, and massive stones with healing powers, what archaeologist David S Anderson, of Radford University calls pseudoarchaeology.^[16] Furthermore, in the United States, scientists describe several of these reality metal-detecting shows as nothing more than “glorified looting.”

U.S. shows include

- *Time Team America*. (PBS, 2009-2014)
- *Diggers*. (National Geographic Channel, 2013-15). (The channel is co-owned with Fox Cable Networks.)
- *American Digger*. (Spike TV, 2012-13). Hosted by former wrestler Ric Savage.
- *Savage Family Diggers*. (Spike TV, 2013) “Every episode moves towards a finale of selling the artifacts found, the archaeological record be damned.”
- *Dig Wars*. (Travel Channel, 2013).
- *Dig Fellas*. (Travel Channel, 2013).
- *Nazi War Diggers*. (National Geographic, 2014). Cancelled after a groundswell of viewer and scientist protest.
- *Legends of the Lost*, (Travel Channel, 2018), including an episode where ancient giants roam the U.S., hosted by Hollywood celebrity Megan Fox.
- *America from the Ground Up* (PBS, 2014/2018).

U.K. shows include

- *Time Team*. (Channel 4, 1994-2014)
- *Digging for Britain*. (BBC, 2011-2019)

clams to the diet of the Shishalh Nation on B.C.'s Sunshine Coast.



Each episode includes discussion and demonstration of archaeological methods. Here Jacob participates in percussion coring to explore a lake near Serpent Mounds, Ontario. Driving a core deep into the lakebed with a 20-pound slide hammer, Jen and Jacob collect sediment samples representing thousands of years of history. This sediment contains clues that may help unravel the mystery of how and when the Serpent Mounds were constructed.



Each episode also makes time to explore the spiritual significance of both ancient and modern Indigenous communities. Here Jen speaks with a number of elders near her home community and admits that she has a lot to learn, partly because her early education was lacking.



At her home community in the First Nation of Serpent River, Ontario, Jen's father demonstrates a moose call.

- *Bone Detectives*. (Channel 4, 2019-present)
- *Great British Dig: History in Your Back Garden* (Channel 4, 2020-present)

One archaeologist who had worked with a number of TV channels and shows in the U.S. and U.K. summed up her experience:

"I was hopeful that each program would showcase great archaeology, but always disappointed (and in one particular instance, horrified) with the final products." [18]

The worst shows, adored by white nationalists and the Christian right in Europe and North America, consciously work to de-couple Indigenous peoples from the archaeological record. Fantasies of Atlantis, ancient aliens, Caucasian first peoples, and the like serve to undercut Indigenous beliefs that they are the America's first inhabitants. Anybody but Indigenous peoples and any route other than the land bridge or coastal migration route from Asia. Even the respected Canadian series, *The Nature of Things*, hosted by the usually reliable and often radical environmentalist David Suzuki, is not immune to this bogus science. In 2018 it aired *Ice Bridge*, a documentary which argued that Caucasians from Europe were the first settlers in North America, 20,000 years ago. These theories have been roundly debunked by all serious scientists. But they make for sensational TV.

Archaeologists have not been shy in their critiques of TV's 'entertainment archaeology.' Some object to eccentric and exaggerated portrayals of archaeologists and many critique the unrealistically rapid processes of analysis. Scientists also raise eyebrows at the 'beat the clock' element as a staple of the television format. [19] The range of archaeologists on TV go from bad to good. Here's my way to evaluate these programs:

- Bogus—No archaeologists involved on camera or as writers or consultants.
- Poor—Occasional use of archaeologists on-screen or as script advisors, but without substantial control over the final program. Programs use the science selectively and mix hard science with pseudo-archaeology.
- Good—Archaeologists involved on-screen and with some control over program content, but not the principle host or narrator. *Time Team*, *Time Team America*.
- Excellent—Archaeologists involved at all levels of the program, including design, script, on-screen presentation. Archaeologist as host and on-screen presenter.

Even in the 'Excellent' category the lure of celebrity performance over real archaeology can skew the results. Some British shows feature hosts with real, accomplished scientists but the media training they have received (or the demands of executive producers) pushes them into a celebrity presenter mold, which distorts the reality of archaeology. In *Digging for Britain* Professor Alice Roberts, a widely respected scientist, uses a type of diction and line reading that can only be described as 'over-the-top.' Every noun becomes the excuse for ecstatic delivery. Every archaeological fact becomes monumental. In addition, the camera never loses an opportunity to create close-up glamor shots of Roberts. The regular site workers and other scientists actually doing the work never seem to get this royal treatment.

In 2015 the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) set out guidelines for their support of TV programs.

"We preconditioned our involvement on the following: (1) no monetary value of artifacts would be shown or discussed; (2) the show's protagonists would work under the direction of an on-screen

archaeologist; (3) the show in no way would glorify or encourage looting of archaeological sites. In addition, we asked that each show focus on a research question, include discussions of heritage values, incorporate descendant and local communities, and promote conservation of the archaeological record.”

It especially cautioned against shows that promote “object-oriented metal detecting”—the much-despised looting shows.

An Indigenous archaeology

It starts with this, says Reimer: Indigenous archaeology is practiced with, by, and for Indigenous communities. [20] This takes us well beyond the best practices outlined above in the SAA guidelines. In general terms it places oral history and traditions on par with other sources of Western scientific knowledge. It also aims to make the work more valuable to the descendant and local communities, says Anishinabe scholar Sonya Atalay.[21] “I keep finding more and more synergies between cultural knowledge and science,” says Reimer in his introduction to the series in *Wild Anthropology*’s episode one.



Short animation sequences—hand-drawn, stop motion, computer assisted—begin many episodes.

“The integration of Indigenous perspectives into academia is new to many disciplines but it has a long history in Archaeology.” From its start in the 1990s, says Reimer, Indigenous Archaeology, has now “become central to how the ancient past is investigated and interpreted.” [22] *Wild Archaeology* clearly rejects the tropes of pseudo-archaeology. In fact, as a lay-person, I’m constantly amazed at how these scientists get excited by the smallest of finds in their digs. A tiny, broken arrowhead or battered sherd of pottery can carry great significance; we’ll have no jewel-encrusted daggers or mummified queens here. Although the series looks closely at how cultural knowledge can shape archaeology it does not neglect the new and rapidly developing science. So, various episodes highlight techniques of radio-carbon analysis, chemical analysis, sonar scanning, and Laser Ablation. Some of this is new even to Dr. Reimer.

Viewers of the series can have no doubt that Reimer maintains professional control over the archaeological content and its interpretation. He is not simply a talking head or consultant used by the filmmakers as a nod to authenticity. And unlike many popular archaeology shows, it’s Reimer who is the lead presenter and narrator. Soft-spoken, and in the first episodes perhaps a tad nervous, his presentation is decidedly un-glamorous—the opposite of slick—contra *Digging*



Jen and Jacob try to perform the potato dance at the Serpent river pow-wow.



Serpent River pow-wow – a community dance with many children.



A running gag throughout the series is Jacob's limited palate, which makes it hard for him to appreciate fish and clam dishes. Here in the high arctic he tries something new – an opportunity for Jen to make fun.

for Britain. "I don't see myself as a celebrity, says Reimer. "Maybe it's how I was taught to be humble and respectful and not ask for much." [23] When I asked Tracy German to describe her approach to the series it became obvious why she had chosen Reimer. "Most archaeology shows are far too scripted with actors playing the hosts," said German. [24]

In viewing both seasons of the series I am struck by several basic principles that run through each episode.

- First, Indigenous archaeology strongly declares its difference from standard Western practice. It is much less destructive and respectful of the digging sites.
- Second, this occurs largely because the scientists work hard to create links and relationships with the local communities.
- Third, the Indigenous scientists feel a dual responsibility to both the discipline and to the communities.
- Fourth, each episode reminds us of both the similarities and differences among Indigenous groups across the country.
- Fifth, Indigenous peoples can trace at least 10,000 years of occupation in North America.
- Sixth, everywhere across Canada there are living communities with links to the ancient past.

Finally, the series reminds us of the high stakes surrounding this activity. Good Indigenous archaeology leads to stronger communities and contributes to victories around land-rights.



"He welcomed us in his language to the territory, which is really important."



"I'd like to thank you in my language, in Squamish, we're neighbours."

Indigenous cinema

Wild Archaeology uses a variety of standard documentary scenes and situations. Each episode follows the same pattern. Dr Rudy explains where they will be travelling and provides a brief introduction to the specific Indigenous community. In each location the team meets the lead archaeologist and key members of the community, who are often Elders. The archaeologist outlines the work being undertaken at this location and its significance. In many cases the site has proven to be thousands of years old.



Setting up a shot at Shishalh First Nation, coastal B.C.

These are for the most part single-site programs; each episode takes us to one place. It's a familiar sub-genre. Jacob and Jenifer then get teamed up with archaeology students who set them to work digging, brushing, picking, sorting, cleaning, tagging and bagging. The photography, featuring many tight close-ups, puts viewers right "in the hole" learning with the team how this work gets done. Some of the tasks can be heavy but mostly its fine-grained and minutely detailed labour. Any casual viewer of archaeology shows will recognize the techniques.

A few of the programs feature other Indigenous archaeologists, people with links to current or ancient groups associated with the site. For example, in Series 1, Episodes 8 and 9 we meet Elroy White, of Heiltsuk Nation in the central coast of B.C. White is another professor from Simon Fraser University. Like Reimer he emphasizes his Indigenous approach, which he calls an “Internalist archaeology,” specifically as a “systematic research on Heiltsuk stone fish traps.” This type of fishing is poorly understood in academia, he argues:

“My research objective is unique in that I de-emphasize empirical data such as length, width, and height in favour of the view that these stone fish traps are products of my ancestors’ labour.”

“My main goal was to work with the Heiltsuk political and cultural entities and twelve Heiltsuk oral historians to employ an Internalist archaeology investigation of a selective fishery system that began in antiquity.”[25]

At most of the sites across Canada featured in the series the scientists are non-Indigenous, however in many episodes at least one of the technicians or students come from the community, clan, or First Nation linked to the dig. In Series 2, Episode 7 Jacob is put to work with Dawn Wambold, a Metis graduate student working with the Metis archaeologist Kisha Supernant.



As they kneel together beside a small excavation, Jacob asks, “Since you’re Metis did you choose this particular place for your work?”

“Yes, she answers, this site gives me a chance to learn on my own what the lives of my ancestors would have been like.”

In each episode at regular intervals we jump ahead to the end of the teams’ visit and see direct-to-camera comments from Reimer, Jacob, and Jenifer. This allows the team members to summarize their experience and to add more context. This too is a standard device in most archaeology TV, such as *Time Team*.

However, these TV presenters see themselves differently. In Series 2, Episode 3 the site archaeologist informs Jenifer Brousseau (while she is deep in a pit sorting through ancient fish bones) that this layer of sediment near the surface reminds us that the community was wiped out in a smallpox epidemic in 1935. We immediately cut to a shot recorded later where Brousseau reflects on what she has heard. “In that moment that he told me, it was a sobering moment.”



“In that moment that he told me—it was a sobering moment.”

The ‘reflective’ scenes where Jenifer and Jacob speak of what they have learned, or felt, or worried about bring us into contact with a different sort of knowledge. These differ as well from Dr. Rudy’s summing up straight-to-camera scenes. Although Jenifer and Jacob always look slightly off-camera, as to an out-of-frame interviewer, there is a sense that we the audience are getting a more intimate moment with the real Jenifer—speaking frankly to us, not to Jacob or Dr. Rudy. In one instance, for example, Jenifer speaks about her anxiety, even dislike of walking through spaces on the Prairies once occupied by the Northwest Mounted Police or a 19th century church school for Indigenous youth in Montreal.

Here, I think, we can feel the influence of Tracy German’s direction. She states,

“My first goal as a director is to make people comfortable.” [26]
“Filmmaking has been a journey for me to understand where I come from and overcome some of the trauma of our people. I had to learn to trust my interior voice. I had to learn that a small voice can be powerful.” [27]

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Narratives of discovery



Like many recent nature documentaries *Wild Archaeology* makes use of drone footage. Here Jacob shows off his personal model.



"I think Indigenous," says director Tracy German. "That starts with the landscape and one's place in it." German, with clapper-board, on the left.



The three hosts of the series perform several

In a sense these Indigenous archeology programs offer narratives of discovery. But not discovery according to the cliched trope of the spectacular find. We come to expect that Jacob or Jen will, in the course of their volunteer labour at the digs, discover something useful to the scientists, albeit often unrealistically quickly. This too is a staple of all archaeology-TV. It's also a trope lovingly mocked in the British comedy series *Detectorists* (Q. "Are you a metal detector?" A. "Detectorist.")

Unlike the standard shows, *Wild Archaeology* doesn't lean on a detective narrative. The storyline avoids a drive toward the lost, spectacular find. Instead, over 22 minutes we glide back and forth between work with the scientists at the site and conversation or events with Elders in the nearby community. This alternating structure illustrates the primary theme—that ancient archaeological sites lead directly to contemporary First Nations—one people from time immemorial. And as the series often insists this ancient time is not pre-history, it is *pre-contact* with Europeans. Every episode highlights a present-day Indigenous community living at or near the archaeological site. This underlines a striking difference with, for example, British dig shows where it's hardly likely that we'll meet a local with ties to Druids or Romans.

In *Wild Archaeology* discoveries are made and the outcome often contributes to new knowledge. In a few cases a piece of pottery or an animal bone with marks from an ancient obsidian tool will make it into a museum. But no one will get rich or famous from these finds.

In the same episode mentioned above, where Jenifer learns about the 1935 smallpox epidemic, we discover that this beautiful coastal BC site is known by the Shishalh, or Sechelt, First Nation as "Clam Bay." Very soon Jacob can be seen deep in a hole that has functioned for thousands of years as a midden, aka garbage dump. It sits at the top of a cliff near a chief's dwelling and at every layer in the soil we can see many types of shells—butter clams, horse clams, cockles, mussels. "It's amazing," says Jacob, as he carefully lines up a group of shells at the top of the pit, "these clams and shells go eight feet down." Many of the shells are large. These differ from the smaller shell remains found down the hill near the beach. The Elders and archaeologist explain that the chiefs ate better than the ordinary folk.

For most viewers in Canada and elsewhere the discoveries contained in the series centre on the places of importance to Indigenous peoples, many places with remarkable names: Squamish, Bella Bella, Serpent River, Tuktoyaktuk, Iqaluit, Kahnawake, Head-Smashed In. The late Irish geographer Tim Robinson spoke about the importance of names, reminding us that a placename summarizes

"the place's attributes and origins, asserts its excellencies and rights to respect. Therefore, the handing down and rehearsal of its placename is a place's first defense against neglect or exploitation...."[28]

[\[open endnotes in a new page\]](#)

roles. First off, they are role models of how to be an Indigenous scientist and student.



Jenifer returns home to Serpent River First Nation, Ontario and talks to her chief, Isadore Day.



Dr. Rudy demonstrates ground-penetrating radar, a relatively new tool in archaeology, which he emphasizes as 'non-invasive and non-destructive,' an important concept for Indigenous methodologies.



The animation reminds viewers of the natural and spiritual worlds that guide and shape Indigenous archaeology.

Landscape cinematography

"I think Indigenous," says Tracy German. "That starts with the landscape and one's place in it." [29] German studied with the Canadian experimental filmmaker Phil Hoffman, who emphasized an "auto-ethnographic" approach, which to her meant knowing your roots, including the surrounding landscape. Many of the locations that the series visits prove to be quite remote, especially northern B.C. and the high Arctic. Other sites are rugged but an easy distance from urban areas. In each case the landscape cinematography plays a key role, showing, often through sweeping long shots, not only the natural beauty but the geographic and cultural context for the ancient site. The grandeur and scope of these landscapes also remind us that Indigenous peoples lived and travelled over vast areas. The archaeological dig may occupy only a small speck of land, but the territory lived in was often immense.

Landscape cinematography is accompanied by explanatory narration by Reimer or an Elder who lead our eye to features of the geography missed by an outsider. What might appear to be a natural ridge turns out to be an ancient human-built wall. Sometimes Reimer speaks directly to the camera, in other instances we hear him in voice-over. In addition, Reimer or the Elder with local knowledge almost always present a spiritual way of seeing the landscape. This landscape cinematography's effect cannot be over-estimated. When shots of the Indigenous presenters show them looking out over a broad valley or across a massive, cascading river they are making a political statement not only about the past but about the present and future. This is our land and the tiny plot of the archaeological dig represents only a center not the whole.

An alpine country site in ancient Squamish territory, just north of Vancouver.

Hosts as role models



Jenifer and Jacob, like many people who appear on reality TV, perform two roles. On the one hand they stand in for us—ordinary folks without much archaeological knowledge. We are encouraged to see them as real persons with strong personalities and full lives beyond TV. On the other hand, they are clearly professional actors, with a practiced ability to perform before the camera and with each other. They come across with a relaxed naturalness achieved in part through their training and acting experience. Many scenes show light-hearted banter and friendly competition between the two. Other scenes present them in a quiet place, alone before the camera speaking about what they've learned and their feelings.



The last two episodes in the series take place in the most rugged and remote area yet visited, an island in the Arctic near Iqaluit, in the territory of Nunavut. The Inuit Heritage Trust has hired archaeologists to re-build a *comica* or whale bone house, "an act of cultural recuperation," say Reimer.



Jacob and his aunt Laura Pratt bring the Dakota language into the series.

When Agnes Varda appears on-screen in her films *The Gleaners and I* (2003) or *Varda by Agnes* (2019) she creates a documentary world in which the tables can turn abruptly from objective to subjective, from canny observer to humble participant. Varda not only embodies but demonstrates the practice of an astonishing, endlessly creative artist. Like Varda, the hosts of *Wild Archaeology* also explore both objective and subjective practice, albeit in a more modest, less dazzling manner. On the surface they fit the ordinary tropes of documentary expert and personality narrators. Beyond that, however, they give us role models and exemplify a way of being in the world—they show us how to be committed scientists, students, and Indigenous intellectuals. This is a substantial achievement.

The relative youth of Jacob and Jenifer as presenters sets *Wild Archaeology* apart from many shows in the genre. Most TV business surveys confirm that reaching a younger audience presents a major challenge for all history programs. To address this challenge each episode highlights the relative youth of Jacob and Jenifer through their manner of speaking, their dress (and tattoos), their friendly competitions, and above all by their supple and energetic physical abilities. Jacob scrambles happily up rock faces and dons snorkeling gear; Jenifer revels in a white-water rafting expedition.

In addition, the presence of Jenifer and Jacob allows the series to use them as lay figures. They can ask the basic questions that most viewers would be unaware of: what was potlatch, how did a buffalo jump work, how do Metis people define themselves? We might also see Jenifer and Jacob specifically as Indigenous students, people with a keen interest and growing knowledge. In Series 2, Episode 3 Jacob gets teamed up with Darryl Jackson at a site on the central BC coast. Jackson, who is a member of the Shishalh community, works as a field technician. In their conversation Jacob asks, "Why is it important for you to do this." Jackson answers,

“I enjoy it for one and because the ancestors are telling us a story and I like to be involved. I believe my ancestors are there with me when I’m doing an excavation.”

“What do you think,” asks Jacob, “when you think that one of your direct ancestors could have eaten out of this shell? It connects these artifacts to you.” “To us,” replies Darryll. “I think it’s going to help our people—if more people get involved.”



“I believe my ancestors are there with me when I’m doing an excavation.”

Above all, it’s the Indigenous person as presenter that sets things apart. Rudy Reimer demonstrates on-screen that his practice moves well beyond the search for physical evidence of traditional archaeology. He emphasizes the cultural and political context surrounding a dig for the past. In his gentle way Reimer continually brings up the tough questions about Indigenous life after contact with Europeans. Through the course of its episodes we learn about the Canadian government’s policies—what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission defined as cultural genocide:

- outlawing of language,
- outlawing seal and whale hunting,
- destroying fishing weirs,
- banning the potlatch,
- legacy of residential schools,
- theft of human remains.



A bowhead whale hunt, the concluding episode of the series. For southern, non-Indigenous viewers (like myself) these may be the most

In most archaeological TV an actor plays the host and scientists are brought in for authenticity (or eccentric color). *Digging for Britain* provides an exception with Professor Roberts as host, but as I’ve argued above, her on-screen manner falls more into the celebrity performer role. In contrast, *Wild Archaeology* flips the presenter/scientist pairing on its head; here Dr. Rudy, the scientist, functions as host and the non-scientist actors follow his directions. This is insider archaeology. The chief scientist and his two young presenter/students embody links to the ancient peoples being studied.

The past as future

“Who has a right to control the past?” That’s a question now posed by many leading archaeologists.

challenging scenes, given contemporary attitudes to whale hunting. Reimer emphasizes that this is a once in a century event of profound significance to the Inuit community. The bowhead is not especially endangered and the people will make use of every part of the animal.

“It is not just an academic question, but a practical reality that must be faced in the many day-to-day interactions between archaeologists and Indigenous peoples.”[30]



In the final episode an Inuit community at Qaummaarviit, near Iqaluit in the high Arctic, organizes a whale hunt—something not done since the late 19th century.

The series takes us deep into the academic discipline of archaeology, showing how ancient sites are discovered, studied, and valued according to new scientific methods *as well as* showing how that work can incorporate traditional cultural knowledge.



“I would love to have a laser ablation instrument in my lab.” Dr Rudy learns about the work being done at Laurentian University with materials from the Serpent River First Nation.

This blending of knowledge brings new facts and interpretations into our understanding of the past. *Wild Archaeology* breaks new ground not only in the study of Canada’s past but in the representation of Indigenous peoples. We see new content and new role models—including scientists, students, and community members. Each episode reminds viewers that every unearthed artifact represents new evidence of Indigenous culture and ancient societies. Thus, every piece of evidence from the past strengthens the political case for the future.

What other documentary programs have traveled so widely? What other



Tracy German explained to me the significance of this photograph. "Laura is Jacob's Aunt on his father's side and Laura is pictured with me - she did all the Dakota translations and the voice /versioning along with her sisters Audrey and Donna Pratt from Sioux Valley, Manitoba. I am an adopted little sister to the Dakota Nation through Laura - from our relationship with *Wild Archaeology*."

programs have negotiated and worked with twenty-plus communities? The series also sets a high bar for collaborative filmmaking with Indigenous communities, facilitating dialog. In fact, German and Reimer have received several invitations from First Nations to visit and document the archaeology being carried out in their areas. That high bar means that documentary makers need to draw on the practice of Indigenous archaeology and take genuine collaboration well beyond simple permission to film.

In this moment of COVID we may be tempted to feel that the old world, our previous 'normal' has vanished. None of us can be certain what even the short-term future will look like. Will we return to the old normal? In such a moment it may be useful, even calming, to consider much longer, older stretches of time. It may also be sobering to consider societies that have already faced such wrenching breaks between past and present. As a white person, living in a settler society, the inheritor of a brutal regime of imperial conquest, I can in 2020 begin to educate myself about Indigenous history.

Wild Archaeology broke new ground in one final area. As director Tracy German and actor Jacob Pratt worked together in Series One they developed a close relationship with Jacob's aunt, Laura Pratt. They hatched a new scheme. For Series Two, Jacob and his aunt would develop and record voice-over translations into Dakota language. This marks a first for a TV series anywhere in the world.

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Notes

1. Interviewed in the documentary, *The New Corporation*, Joel Bakan and Jennifer Abbott, 2020. Of course, my statement that Indigenous peoples are gaining in political strength should not be taken to indicate anything like unanimity in Indigenous politics. Even on the environmental front some First Nations, especially in oil-rich Alberta, support the pipelines. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. "Despite promise of reconciliation, Trudeau spent nearly \$100M fighting First Nations in court during first years in power." [Brett Forester](#), *APTN News*, December 18, 2020.
3. *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Volume One: Summary* (Toronto: Lorimer & Company, 2015) p. 234-239.
4. *Final Report*, p. 294-297.
5. Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997) Chapter 18.
6. Indigenous has become the preferred term for describing the Native peoples who reside in Canada. The term Aboriginal has passed from use. Many groups refer to their political status as First Nations, but this term does not include the many Indigenous peoples who do not reside in official Reserves. Many people refer to themselves colloquially as Indians, but the term has no traction in serious discussion, except in making a distinction from the Inuit.
7. Noriaki Tsuchimotowas the acclaimed director of the Japanese series, *Minamata: The Victims and Their World* (1971).
- 7a. Film sources:
 - *Jordan River...* (National Film Board of Canada, NFB)
 - *Kainayssini Imanistaisiwa: The People Go On* (NFB)
 - *One day in the Life...* (iTunes)
 - *Angry Inuk* (NFB)
 - *The Body Remembers* (Netflix)
 - *Blood Quantum* (Shudder TV)
 - *Beans* (Mongrel Media, not streaming yet)
8. A short interview with Tracy German provides background and her approach to filmmaking. See "Tracy German." Indigenous Voice, Sheridan College. April 23, 2020. https://youtu.be/GPKh5YJ3_Wk
9. For more information on Tracy German's work and production company, Palefox Pictures, see <http://palefoxpictures.com/productions>.
10. Bob Muckle, "Indigenous, Extreme and Wild Archaeology," *Anthropology News*, October 14, 2016. For Reimer's scholarly approach to his work in his home

community see his PhD dissertation, “Lithics and Landscapes of SKWXWÁ7MESH UXWUMIXW” McMaster University, 2011.
<https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/11794/1/fulltext.pdf>

11. Reimer provided an extensive outline of the first series and his approach to it in a lecture at Simon Fraser University (October 10, 2017.
https://youtu.be/_Aam4-RKykk.) This fascinating lecture also shows that there is very little difference between Reimer’s on-screen and off-screen persona. Of course, in both instances he is performing a role, however for the series he has not been made slick for TV.
12. “Squamish Nation archaeologist helps Indigenous communities share their history, their way.” Brandon Barrett, *Pique*, August 30, 2020.
13. Some of the best analysis of Reality TV can be found in Richard Kilborn’s *Staging the Real: Factual TV programming in the age of Big Brother*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
14. Professor Jaime Ginter, personal correspondence, October. 22, 2020.
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15. Jeffrey H. Altschul, “Editorial,” *SSA Archaeological Record*. March 15, 2015. Vol 15, No 2. Special Issue “Archaeological Practice on Reality TV.”
16. David S. Anderson, “How TV shows use serious archaeology to promote bogus history.” *Washington Post*, December 27, 2018.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/12/28/how-tv-shows-use-serious-archaeology-promote-bogus-history/>
17. Eduardo Pagan. “Digging for ratings gold: *American Digger* and the Challenge of Sustainability for Cable TV.” *SAA Archaeological Record*. March 2015. p.13.
18. Meg Watters, op cit, p. 21.
19. Chiara Bonacchi of University College London summarizes this literature in her study of audience engagement for archaeological TV. “Audiences and Experiential Values of Archaeological Television: The Case Study of *Time Team*.” *Public Archaeology*, Vol. 12 No. 2, May 2013, p. 117-31.
20. Simon Fraser University, October 10, 2017. https://youtu.be/_Aam4-RKykk
21. Sonia Atalay, *Community-Based Archaeology: Research with, by, and for Indigenous Communities*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 39.
22. Dr. Rudy Reimer Lecture, University of Northern BC. February 23, 2018.
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Since at least the 1930s, Martí's face has adorned the Cuban 1 peso. This exemplar dates from the 1980s and reiterates, graphically, the familiar narrative of continuity between the nation's nineteenth century "Apostle" and its twentieth century socialist revolution.



The most famous of Martí monuments, built in the 1950s and located in Havana's iconic Revolution Plaza.

Cuba's "Apostle" desacralized: melancholic aesthetics and the specter of assembly in *José Martí: Eye of the Canary*

by [Eric Morales-Franceschini](#)

Fernando Pérez's *José Martí: Eye of the Canary* (2010) has been touted as the most noteworthy cinematic event in twenty-first century Cuba. The film's melancholic aesthetics and portrayal of young Martí desacralize the nation's "Apostle," offering Cubans a more intimate and vulnerable Martí with whom to reckon. So, too, does it provocatively render Martí as a "dissident" who nonviolently cries out for rights to free speech and assembly.

Yet Afro-Cubans and Cuban women never truly inflect this cinematic project of a Cuba "with all and for the good of all." Their bodies and desires never assemble nor speak out politically, and that absence renders *Eye of the Canary* a paradoxical cinematic text that *pleads for* but does not *performatively enact* democracy. This essay explores how the film differs from the myths and visual rhetoric that customarily shroud Martí and also how it is intriguingly in (and out of) touch with the assembly politics and non-violent protests that characterize much of the contemporary world.

Lovingly known as the Patria's "Apostle," José Martí is the most revered Cuban. So many things in Cuba testify to his status as national martyr and exemplary patriot:

- the busts in every schoolyard,
- his face on the most commonly used currency (1 peso),
- the larger-than-life statues throughout Havana,
- the yearly commemorations of his birth and his death,
- the symposia and seminars of the Center for José Martí Studies, and
- the numerous manuscripts published annually by or about Martí.

Yet what Martí symbolizes for Cubans was never easily discerned or without controversy. As Lillian Guerra (2006) has documented, Martí has as many interpretations as there are constituencies and agendas in the Cuban polity—on and beyond the island. Whether portrayed as literary virtuoso, magisterial orator, civic "maestro," saintly martyr, or revolutionary militant, he seems to embody virtues and ideologies not easily reconciled, if at all. That his writings and speeches are not only prolific (i.e. no less than 25 volumes) but also poetic and aphoristic does not make matters easier. Indeed, it could be said that Martí is less a passion than he is, as José Lezama Lima (Velazco 2011, 126) once put it, a "mystery," one that tirelessly haunts and hails Cubans.



Published and promoted by the Center for Martí Studies in Havana, Martí's oeuvre amounts to as many as twenty-eight volumes as of 2020.



José Martí: el ojo del canario film poster.

This essay examines how Cuban cinema has approached that mystery and to what effect. In particular, I am interested in how Fernando Pérez's *José Martí: The Eye of the Canary* (2010) takes up that topic. This is a film touted by critics as the most noteworthy cinematic event since the release of the Oscar-nominated *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993). For example, critic Emilio Bejel (2012, 67) recalls the standing ovations and teary-eyed embraces that the film elicited in Cuban theaters. With religious language, Cuban poet Fina García Marruz (2011, 16) refers to the film as a "miracle," as does philosopher Fernando Martínez Heredia, calling it "spiritual nourishment" (2011, 158).

Why has the film spoken so tenaciously to Cubans and how does it differ from the myths that customarily shroud Martí? One answer lies in its rendition of Martí as utterly human—a Martí "neither sanctified nor statue-fied," as Joel del Río (2011, 128) nicely puts it. Indeed, for the first half of the film, the script presents Martí as a meek and introspective schoolboy warmly known as "Pepe"; only in the last quarter does he, as a seventeen-year-old pupil, bear any resemblance to the fiery orator and patriot Cubans have come to identify as their "Apostle." Yet these attributes alone do not satisfactorily account for the film's signifying power. For they do not address the film's provocative pleas for democracy. For no idle choice does the film show Martí as a "dissident" and give him a closing scene while in jail. In particular, the rights of free speech and assembly are what are most viscerally staged and most emphatically at stake. In what is the film's climactic scene, Martí cries out at his trial, "My right to speak has never existed!"

Indeed, *Eye of the Canary* conspicuously foregoes an epic tale of martyrs who fall in combat and, in its stead, foregrounds a civilly disobedient youth who cries out for rights to free speech and assembly. On the other hand, the script primarily foregrounds the voices and prerogatives of Cuba's urban and white sons, who assemble politically and whose desires spell out the project of Cuba Libre. Never does the film show that project inflected by the intellects or desires of Afro-Cubans, Cuban women, or Cuba's exploited workers. Thus, the filmmakers' narrative choices call for closer scrutiny.

To explain the context of my inquiry into this film, and its importance, first I discuss Martí's "sublime" death and its resonance within Cuba's postwar republic and collective Cuban consciousness. I then read and historically contextualize *The White Rose* (1954) and *Pages from Martí's Diary* (1971), the only other feature-length films on Martí. Lastly, I delve into *Eye of the Canary*, with an eye for what critical possibilities its "melancholic" aesthetics and "desacralized" portrayal of Martí have to offer as well as those possibilities it does not follow.

Martí and the iconography of death

Abdala, a fictional Nubian warrior in José Martí's 1869 *Abdala* declaims:

"Nubia is victorious!
I die happy: death
Little does it matter, for I was able to save her...
Oh, how sweet it is to die when one dies
Struggling audaciously to defend the patria!"
[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

A classic account of that most "sublime" of secular loves, namely the love of



Jorge Arche's 1943 oil on wood painting, "Martí in a guayabera," is one of the most popular and widely circulated renditions of Martí, notable for its subtly intimate and religiously coded portrayal of the "Apostle."



A twenty-seven-year-old Fidel Castro, arrested as one of the conspirators in the Moncada Barracks attack of 1953 (centennial of Martí's birth). In his legendary defense, known as "History Will Absolve Me," Castro credited Martí as the "intellectual author" of the Moncada attacks.

Nation, *Abdala* was published in Martí's periodical, *Patria Libre*, within the first year of what came to be known as the Ten Years' War (1868-78). Martí was only sixteen-years-old when he wrote this play in poetic verse as a literary homage to the separatists' war in Cuba's far east, and he offered this romanticized call for others, too, to sacrifice their lives for the Patria. Such a desire for a patriotic "happy" death was not of course peculiar to Martí. At least two years before *Abdala* was written, fifty-year-old "Perucho" Figueredo, an Oriente lawyer and landowner, wrote the words and melody to what became (and remains) Cuba's national anthem, *la Bayamesa*; in that anthem, the most routinely cited verse reads: "fear not a glorious death/for to die for one's country is to live." [2] And not unlike Perucho, Martí would die his own "happy" death at the Battle of Dos Ríos in May 1895.

Yet Martí's death hardly aroused happiness in Cuba's collective consciousness. Three years later, the United States militarily intervened in Cuba (1898-1902, 1906-09) and left in its wake the Platt Amendment, a naval base in Guantánamo, and a "pseudo-Republic" friendly to U.S. investors and the mafia. That was a far cry from that republic "with all and for the good of all" that Martí had eloquently intoned. In terms of Cuban culture, Martí's death came to signify the death of Cuba Libre itself. As one of the more popular songs of the early twentieth century, "Clave a Martí," lamented:

"Martí no debió a morir
Ay de morir
Si fuera el maestro del día
Otro gallo cantarí
La patria se salvaría
Y Cuba sería feliz"

.....

"Martí should not have died
Oh! Not have died
If he were the maestro of the day
A different story would be heard
The patria rescued
And happy would Cuba be" [3]

As Bejel (2012, 92) has argued in Freudian terms, within Cuban culture Martí is no mere hero inasmuch as a "redeeming saint," one who would have instituted that "moral republic" so eagerly anticipated by the wars of independence. As



Title scene in *La rosa blanca* (1953), a nod to Martí's *Versos sencillos* and the familiar trope of whiteness as symbolic of purity, holiness, and virtue.



Mexican actor Roberto Cañedo as José Martí, regularly depicted throughout the film as stately, if not presidential. Nearly all shots are low-angled, with shorter actors at his side all looking upwards at him and with bated breath at his every word.



Much of the film situates Martí in the company of the refined and the respectable. Here we see him in the company of Mexico's aristocratic intelligentsia, with status symbols like the piano and chandeliers in full display.

history proceeded, the unsavory reality of Cuba's "republican" era made it such that Cubans did not mourn inasmuch as melancholically fixate on his death. Martí became that lost object from which Cubans could not (or would not!) effectively withdraw their "libidinal" attachments and by which, consciously or otherwise, they expressed their disenchantment with Cuban reality. Martí as such lived on a specter of what-could-have-been—and, thereby, of what-should-be. This may be precisely why his commemoration became obligatory. With the 1921 "Law that Glorifies the Apostle," Martí's birthday, January 28, was declared a national holiday. All municipalities were expected to name a street and erect a commemorative object (e.g. statue, plaque, etc.) in his honor, as were schoolchildren and citizens to collectively recite verses and offer tributes. However, as Guerra (2006, 34) has noted, such events and their objects do not commemorate inasmuch as *police*, however indecisively, what Martí can signify.

Indeed, anyone who wished to legitimize his or her bid for power has had to reckon with and skillfully enlist the aura of the "Maestro" or "Apostle." This was the case whether one be a ruler or a rebel, whether a Fulgencio Batista or a Fidel Castro. For example, Batista, who came to power by coup in 1952, tried to capitalize on the symbolically rich year 1953, the centennial of Martí's birth. For that, he sponsored commemorative events and projects, not least the famous Martí memorial in Revolution Plaza (formerly Civic Plaza) and the first feature-length film about Martí's life: *La rosa blanca* (*The White Rose*).

Directed by the renowned Mexican filmmaker Emilio "el Indio" Fernández, *La rosa blanca: momentos de la vida de José Martí* (*The White Rose*) first screened in Havana in 1954. It is a two-hour, black-and-white biopic that projects Martí as gifted orator and devout patriot. He is brought to life by a handsome and respectable Roberto Cañedo who delivers one impassioned speech after the next. And while the film's strictly chronological account is driven towards Martí's climactic fall in Dos Ríos, it is mostly devoted to his life in exile and the personal agony and sacrifices he suffers for the sake of his beloved Patria. Low-angle close-ups of Martí's face and scenes set in aristocratic homes, salons, and ballrooms are what stand out visually, just as all that Martí must forgo or disavow (i.e. women, family, career, etc.) are what stand out morally and politically. Martí is portrayed thus as an asexual, morally incorruptible statesmen who dies the death not of a warrior inasmuch as a saintly martyr.

Martí's death was hardly in vain—at least insofar as the film frames it. The closing scene features the lowering of the Spanish flag at Havana's El Morro, the military and ceremonial center of Spanish imperial power, and as a *mambí* bugler solemnly bellows, the Cuban flag comes to wave proudly. The entire scene overlays a faded still of Martí/Cañedo's dead yet sober face. The viewer is thereby summoned to revere more than mourn or fixate Martí's his death, for Cuba Libre has been metonymically (by the raised flag) rendered a consummate fact.

This belies history, of course. For it was the U.S. flag that soared in Havana 1898 and the U.S. Army that took credit for Cuba's "liberation." In fact, remarkably no Americans are seen in *The White Rose*, and only in a subdued tone and ephemeral scene does Martí refer to his many years in the "entrails of the monster." [4]

Even more ironically, in the same year *The White Rose* was filmed and edited under Batista's auspices, Fidel Castro led his historic assault on the Moncada barracks of Santiago de Cuba, an act he would later say was "intellectually authored" by Martí (2007, 88-89). Notably, once in power, Castro would oversee the installation of Martí busts all over the island and cultivate awe for an anti-imperialist and internationalist Martí.





Martí the fiery orator. Here in exile in 1890s New York, rousing crowds to donate to the cause of Cuba Libre.



The closing scene of *La rosa blanca*, with Martí's spectral presence as the Cuban flag is hoisted at El Morro fort in Havana.

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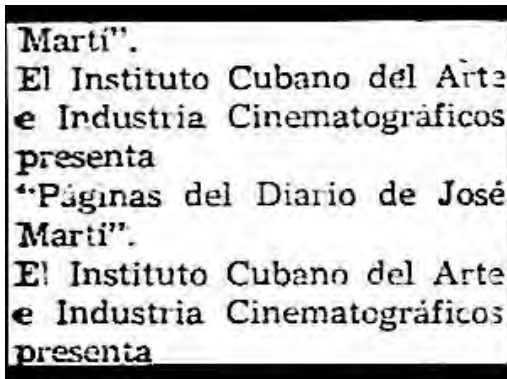
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La muerte de un burócrata: Dedicated proletariat "Paco" and his highly efficient (or rather, lethal) machine that mass produces Martí busts, which come out at the left end of the apparatus.



The title page for *Páginas del diario* visually cites Martí's *Diary*, with repeated phrases and the text put forth as a living testimony.



A young black man emerges from under a back-

Cubans did not, however, submissively receive such lessons and visual cues. For example, Tomás Gutierrez Alea's *Death of a Bureaucrat* (1966) would darkly lampoon Kafkaesque absurdities of (socialist) bureaucracy, including obliquely critiquing the cult of Martí. The film opens at the grave of a fictional Francisco Pérez, lovingly known as "Paco." According to the script, Paco was Cuba's most prized sculptor of Martí busts. He worked tirelessly to meet state quotas and envisioned every Cuban home with its very own patriotic shrine to the Apostle. So obsessed was he that Paco invented a machine that could mass produce Martí busts. But then tragedy struck. The machine malfunctioned and Paco, in an effort to fix it, fell into the mass production and died. The viewer then enjoys the tragicomical antics that Paco's nephew must endure so that his aunt receives her benefits as widow to the exemplary worker. The film thus reflects on the Martí busts critically as the trivialized use or abuse of a national icon.

Cinema became a strategically vital institution for the revolution. A national film institute—popularly known as ICAIC—was created within the revolution's first year. ICAIC was endowed with the mission to create films that consciously countered Hollywood formulas and bourgeois ideology. Over the years, this film institute has yielded exemplary Third Cinema works such as Tomás Gutierrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), Humberto Solás' *Lucía* (1968), and Manuel Octavio Gómez's *The First Machete Charge* (1969).^[5] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Yet it was not until 1971 that ICAIC released its first feature-length film devoted to Martí, namely José Massip's *Páginas del diario de José Martí* (1971). *Páginas* bears no narratological or aesthetic resemblances to *The White Rose*. Whereas the latter situates Martí almost exclusively in exile and in terms of his oratory, the former situates him exclusively on Cuban soil and amidst soldiers. Other contrasts abound: the music of *Páginas* is an avant-garde orchestral score with none of the melodramatic overtures or cues of *The White Rose*. Also, *Páginas* is not just situated in the 19th century. That is, many of the events the film historically reenacts are juxtaposed or "interpreted" by a multiracial troop of modern ballet dancers, with a stress on an embodied agony that speaks to Martí's untimely death and to a nation "born in war."

Taking its cues from Martí's impressionistic and poetic war diary, *Páginas* recounts a series of random events:

- a campesina whose husband is killed and is herself wounded by pro-Spanish volunteers;
- the execution of a rogue bandit;
- the flora and fauna of Oriente Cuba;
- a Spanish soldier who covets a beautiful mulatta, kills her, and goes mad;
- a jealous woman poisons an injured *mambí* officer;
- at last, the day of the battle at Dos Ríos and Martí's death from a stray bullet.

All of this is interspersed not only by the modern dancers but also by the text of the diary, which is read by a variety of voices: men and women, young and old. The film is then punctuated by an epilogue that features contemporary Cuban painters and their modernist or vanguard-stylized renderings of Martí.

bent young white woman—or, allegorically, the duo's modern dance reenacts the birth of the nation: its *mambí* soldier emerging from the Patria's womb.



Martí the general. We see him here in a *mambí* camp, consulting with Commander in Chief Máximo Gómez, days before the “Apostle’s” fall in combat.



Martí's iconic “fall” at Dos Ríos is reenacted in the film.



Abstract Martí art: *Páginas* puts Martí's legacy in artistic dialogue the Revolution's vanguard artists, all of them young men.



In this scene, the actual grandson of the man who shot (an already dead) Martí after his fall from his horse introduces himself as a member of a revolutionary artist brigade, as though to confirm the redeemed and rehabilitated nation that Cuba now was under the Revolution.

With its experimental style, *Páginas* was a decidedly difficult text to decipher. Fernando Pérez (Sánchez 2011, 89) has recalled the film as “polemical” and nearly impossible to comprehend, whereas Michael Chanan (2004, 315 PP) has referred to it as “a truly hallucinatory film.” Indeed, it is no small irony that a film that imaginatively projects a Martí *by* the people would screen so miserably *to* them. Maybe Cuban audiences were not ready to embrace a desacralized Martí, or maybe Massip’s “vanguard” aesthetics were just that far off the popular mark. Whichever may be the case, the next film devoted to Martí did not emerge until nearly forty years later, in a Cuba and ICAIC remarkably unlike that of the late 1960s and early 70s.

Melancholic aesthetics and an eye for youth







Fernando Pérez Valdés, widely acknowledged as

With the loss of Soviet subsidies and the renewal of U.S. hostility in the 1990s (i.e. the Torricelli and Helms-Burton Acts) socialist Cuba found itself adrift in a world where history had allegedly come to an end. Cubans were plagued by scarcities that not only provoked hunger but also disenchantment and embitterment.[6] The *balseros* (rafters) crisis of 1994 was only the most dramatic symptom of this larger crisis of legitimacy, as fewer Cubans—especially younger Cubans—were swayed by accounts of all that the revolution had historically sown and reaped. It was no small irony, after all, that 1990s Havana began to bear an uncanny resemblance to the notorious 1950s. Indeed, Cuba’s metamorphosis into a tourist and dollarized economy bred a culture of hustlers, sex workers, jockeying, entrepreneurialism, and conspicuous consumption that led Cuba’s greatest filmmaker, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (2002), to declare: “We are losing all our

Cuba's greatest living filmmaker.

values.”

The Cuban Communist Party (PCC) did not, of course, stand idly by in these distraught years. The government pursued a series of structural adjustments in the economy in order to adapt to the new neoliberal reality, yet it was clear that ideological adjustments were called for as well. As Hernandez-Reguant (2009) has noted, the cult of José Martí figured decisively in this process, as the revolutionary regime came to embrace a more nationalist than internationalist profile. So, too, was it clear that Cuba's youth (i.e. the revolution's future) were at stake. In this regard ICAIC was all the wiser in its shift towards films in which children and adolescents are protagonists who voice discontent or embody creative alternatives. Exemplifying this tendency are Juan Carlos Cremata's *Viva Cuba* (2005), Gerardo Chijona's *Boleta al paraíso* (2010), Ian Padrón's *Habanastation* (2011), Rudy Mora's *Y sin embargo* (2013), and Ernesto Daranas' *Conducta* (2014). Finally, amidst and in dialogue with these films and historic alterations has come *Eye of the Canary*.^[7]

| | |
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|  |  |
| Damián Rodríguez as 12-year-old "Pepe." | Daniel Romero as Martí, nearing adulthood and, as it were, his "destiny." |
|  |  |
| In stark contrast to Martí as a conscientious rebel who dared to defy imperial Spain, <i>Eye of the Canary</i> has us witness a meek schoolboy, subject to humiliations like bullying. | The "voyeuristic" gaze of the young Martí drives, aesthetically, much of the first half of the film. Against an Apostle known for his majestic oratory, we see a "Pepe" who rarely talks. Instead, he and the viewer look and listen. |



Enslaved Africans being smuggled on shore for

Directed by Fernando Pérez, *Eye of the Canary* is a two-hour fictional biopic that offers the viewer an intimate look at Martí, first as twelve-year-old "Pepe" (Damián Rodríguez) and later as seventeen-year-old José Julian (Daniel Romero). Four relatively equal parts bear the titles, "Abejas" (Bees), "Arias," "Cumpleaños" (Birthday), and "Rejas" (Bars). In "Abejas," we are introduced to José Martí as the meek, bullied schoolboy whose friends and family lovingly call "Pepe." His introspective and voyeuristic gaze drives the film visually and is powerfully conveyed by a face that peers from the edge of doors, windows, or shrubs. That gaze bears witness to a series of humiliations, as when Pepe accompanies his father to the countryside and sees enslaved Africans illegally and brutally brought to shore.

In "Arias," Pepe returns to Havana where he continues his studies and works as

Cuba's lucrative sugar plantocracy. Here, too, the viewer is invited to watch alongside Pepe in silent horror .

bookkeeper in Don Salustiano's café. Here an older university-aged Cuban speaks openly of his hopes for a Cuba Libre, a seditious act that an older Spanish captain reacts against. It is thanks to Don Salustiano that the young man's life is spared, a courageous act for which Don Salustiano pays dearly when, later in the film, his café is callously destroyed. All this Pepe sees and quietly absorbs, but at this time, at home he is just a dutiful son and brother who hands his earnings over to his father for the family's keep. Pepe's sensibilities to the tragic and to the arts are featured as well. As a volunteer at a local theater, and in a particularly sublime scene, Pepe stares mesmerized by opera singer Adelina Patti's recital of the aria "Nessun dorma" (None shall sleep), from the final act of Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*.



Don Salustiano, the loveable *gallego* (Spaniard), in his bodega and signature beret, warmly receiving Pepe as his newest employee.



Pepe at the theater, where he volunteers as an errand boy. In this scene, the young Martí is mesmerized by an operatic recital. The film renders the arts not just beautiful but politically relevant and subversive.



Martí and his mentor, school rector and fervent *independentista* Rafael María de Mendive.

The arts and theater continue to be noteworthy signifiers and spaces in "Cumpleaños," the point at which the seventeen-year-old Martí is introduced. Martí is now the prized pupil of school rector Rafael María de Mendive and actively partakes in propagandistic campaigns for Cuba Libre. Arguably nowhere else is this campaign as lively as it is in the Villanueva theater, where thinly veiled puns are tantamount to cheers for Cuba Libre, all under the watchful eyes of Cuban "volunteers." When at last the stock mulatta performer lets her hair down and cries out "¡Viva Cuba Libre!", the theater is raided by loyalists, a repressive act that comes to engulf all of Havana. When the young Martí is caught and held at gunpoint, he is ordered to cry out "¡Viva España!" The young Martí's audacious silence speaks volumes.



Beloved for its musicalized humor and vulgarity, *teatro bufo* (literally, buffoonery theater) was also renowned for its populist sentiment. In this scene, the stock mulatta character lets her hair down (a transgressive act at the time) and cries out "Viva Cuba Libre!" She is met with boisterous cheers and, shortly thereafter, violent repression



In the aftermath of the Villanueva Theater outburst, Martí is held at gunpoint and told to cry out "Viva España!" The infamous "volunteers" (Cubans loyal to Spain) were credited with the worst atrocities in the wars for independence. Martí remains silent for what feels like an eternity. All around him, young men are being summarily shot.

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A frail yet resolute Martí, prisoner in the infamous San Lázaro stone quarry. His original sentence was seven years hard labor.

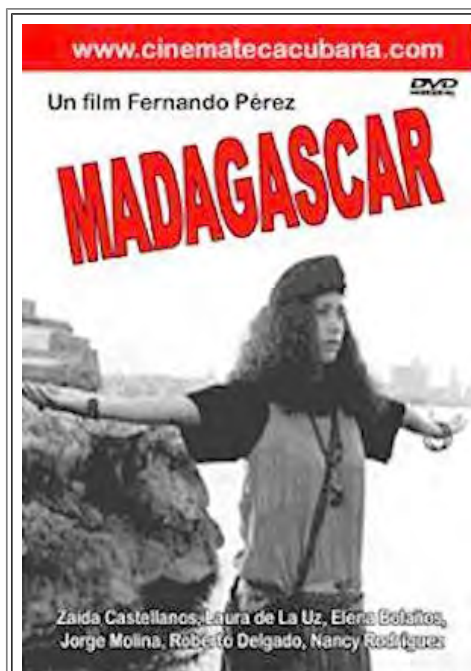
But his audacity leaves Martí’s mother inconsolable and his father bewildered. The youth is imprisoned for a “treasonous” letter in which he calls on a friend to conscientiously object against military service to Spain. In “Rejas,” thus, we see the imprisoned Martí in his patriotic splendor, refusing to recant his letter and stoically carrying out his seven-year sentence to hard labor in a stone quarry. It is no easy sight to bear. Through a cloudy, sepia colored lens, the viewer sees a frail, if not sickly, Martí who shuffles his way around, weighed down by shackles that tear at his flesh. In a deeply moving scene, the father Mariano visits him and gently places small pillows between the shackles and his son’s sore, bloody ankles, while mother Leonor and sisters beg the Governor General for clemency. And although the (Cuban) viewer knows fully well that Martí was to be set free and exiled to Spain, the film ends in a still of the adolescent Martí’s fiery gaze from behind his cell.

On an aesthetic register, the film is marked visually by a melancholic gray that echo’s Pérez’s *Madagascar* (1994)—an aesthetic that defies any sense of Cuba as a sunny tropical island or Cubans as revolutionaries with “pachanga.” Here, Cuba is portrayed as a musty, dreary space of urban squalor and gray skies that all told convey a sense of oppressiveness. This aesthetic is effectively echoed by the film’s sound, which sets a tragic aura through the operatic aria and, at the film’s close, the national anthem played on the piano in a “broken” key—a far cry from its usual milieu of orchestral brass and nationalist rallies or parades. Overall ambient sounds and dialogues emphasize secrecy, with many spoken in near whispers and set in clandestine locales.

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Pérez's candid documentary, *Suite Habana* (2003), has no dialogue or plot, only ambient sound and Havana's crumbling architecture in an ordinary day for ordinary Cubans. Many have read it as requiem on the Cuban peoples' hopes.



Film cover for *Madagascar* (1993), Pérez's absurdist and Kafkaesque film on the psychological disillusionment and uncertainty of the early Special Period years.



La vida es silbar (1998), Pérez's zany and surrealist account of alienated life and lost bearings in post-Soviet Cuba.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Martí at the seaside. In *Eye of the Canary*, Martí's Cuba is no tropical paradise with sunny skies, sandy beaches, and collective festivity. It is grey skies, tempestuous waters, and loneliness.

Aesthetically Fernando Pérez (Sánchez 2011, 82) dedicates *Eye of the Canary* not to José Martí but to playwright Virgilio Piñera—Piñera's *Aire frío* (*Cold Air*) to be exact. *Cold Air*, too, conveys an aura of oppressiveness and melancholia through the trope of Cuba's unbearable heat and the Romaguera family's inability to enjoy any happiness or hope. "Here the heat doesn't kill you [...] but it doesn't let you live either," says daughter Luz Marina, the play's most vocal and memorable character (1959, 52). Luz Marina's daily gripes and grievances, as well as the play's drama, happen in the family's small, overcrowded home and do not change over time. The use of setting strikingly reinforces a sense of claustrophobia and despair. *Eye of the Canary* echoes *Cold Air* with its stress on family strife, economic hardships, and domestic space. One need only look to the numerous scenes set in the young Martí's home—with its cracked walls, aged furniture, and parents who commiserate over their financial precarity. Furthermore, Martí's family is torn asunder by political affiliations and circumstances beyond their immediate control.



The film's drama largely unfolds in urban squalor or, especially, in shadowy, confined spaces that convey oppressiveness, if not despair. The award-winning cinematographer Raul Pérez Ureta deserves as much credit for the film's beautifully "melancholic" aesthetic.



We almost always see the family in their relatively small, dank and derelict apartment—housing with which most Havana residents can relate. This scene is a rare happy moment. Pepe has brought home his earnings for his clerical work and wants to share some with his sisters.



The film's closing image: Martí in his filthy, cold, dark cell

All told, Pérez offers Cubans a Martí with whom they can readily identify. He is not clad in saintly luminosity or statuesque grandeur. Rather, he is shrouded with a melancholic aura and inhabits a vulnerable body. Yet for all that, his integrity and valor are still clear, just as his incarcerated strife is admirable to the viewer. One is moved by Martí's passion and by his quietly fierce gaze at film's end. Pérez rejects the customary, near compulsory, reenactment of Martí's tragic death. Instead, he depicts a Martí in the flower of his youth—crying out for that most seductive of desires in our times, namely democracy.

Dissident voices, assembled bodies

Let us recall how audacious and unlikely it was that the young Martí would write a play (*Abdala*) featuring a heroic black protagonist and an African kingdom as the allegorical Patria. It was far likelier that Martí, son to a Valencian military officer and Canary Islander mother, would be loyal to Spain and fear the Cuban rebels as "negro hordes" out to incite a "race war." But this white Havana schoolboy chose to embrace the soldiers fighting for independence (the *mambises*) and to tell the tale of a war not only for national sovereignty but also for racial equality. Years later Martí would refer to race as a "sin against humanity" and advocate for a

“moral republic” in which Cubans were to be judged and rewarded by their talents and virtues, not their color (2002, 318).



Martí at home, secretly writing *Abdala*.



Martí statue in Havana Park (installed in 1905), one of the first of many Martí memorials, which are typically cast in white marble.

Yet when it comes to Martí iconography in Cuba, whiteness visually reigns with all its familiar connotations of purity, holiness, cleanliness, peace, and goodness. One need look no farther than the two key memorials in Martí’s honor, namely the Havana Central Park and Revolution Plaza statues, each of which cast him in immaculate white marble. Nor is it any less telling that the *The White Rose’s* title poetically endorses a pure and peaceable Martí—a far cry, that is, from the fictional black warrior Abdala or the *mambises* (independence soldiers) of Cuba’s multiracial liberation army.[8] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Whether *Eye of the Canary* diminishes Martí’s iconography in terms of black and white is not easy to discern. The young Pepe wears a *black* armband to mourn the death of Abraham Lincoln, an act that symbolically affiliates him with the abolitionist cause in Cuba. The upright and persecuted Don Salustiano wears a *black* beret. When Pepe is off to the countryside he befriends Tomás, an elder Afro-Cuban who is simultaneously his servant and mentor. It is Tomás who teaches Pepe about Cuba’s flora and fauna and, in a visually striking scene, how to ride a horse. That the horse is *black* is no idle detail. For whether it is Esteban Valderrama’s oil painting “The Death of Martí at Dos Ríos” (1917) or José Massip’s *Pages from Martí’s Diary* (1971), Martí is customarily mounted on a *white* horse, one that visually cues the (Christian) viewer in on the death of a saintly martyr. One could argue, thus, that *Eye of the Canary* provocatively affiliates the color black with antiracism, integrity, solidarity, and liberty—rather than with sin, ugliness, war, and death as is customary in the Occidental collective consciousness.



“The Death of Martí at Dos Ríos” (1918), famous oil painting by Esteban Valderrama. Notice Martí on his *white* horse.



A rare moment of joy and of bountiful sun and greenery, Pepe learns to ride his *black* horse. Nearby is Tomás, his Black “mentor.”

As a character, the tender and “wise” Tomás is, however, an anomaly. The film only portrays Afro-Cubans as slaves—never as *mambí* soldiers or civilian advocates for Cuba Libre. Their naked bodies and agony are called on to visually *ennoble* the cause of the young Martí, but never to substantively voice or enact a project in their own right. In visual terms, the black body is rarely other than an object of cruel treatment or an *eroticized* object for the white gaze, as when Pepe stares at an Afrocubana who, at the river’s edge, does laundry with her breast absentmindedly, yet enticingly, exposed.

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Despite his indentured servitude and *bozal* (Africanized) Spanish, Tomás (played by Enrique Lázaro Piedra) is a sly, playful and wise elder to the young Martí.



In a war and revolution that would come to be known for its decorated and formidable AfroCuban soldiers and generals (not least brothers José and Antonio Maceo), *Eye of the Canary* would have us believe they were mere victims to the infamy of slavery and colonialism and bystanders to the struggle for Cuba Libre.

The same could be said with respect to the film's gender normativity, which takes its cues from none other than *Abdala*. When asked by his mother, Espirta, what his love for her awakens in him, Abdala bluntly replies, "Do you really think there is anything more sublime than love for one's patria?" This patriotic love is readily conflated with a love of war and phallic prowess. Thus, Nubians are portrayed in the literary text as "fierce tigers" and "ferocious panthers" mounted on "noble steeds" with spears at hand. Abdala can in fact hardly temper his (near orgasmic) enthusiasm to see "torrents of blood" flow through the African plains as Nubians repel the foreign invader:

"Oh! What strength and life such joy brings to my soul! How my valor grows! How the blood in my veins burns! How this invincible ardor stirs me! How I desire to be off to battle!" (2012, 14-15).

Even Abdala's sister, Elmira, scolds her mother for her tears and grief in masculinist terms:

"Do you not hear the sublime sound of the roar of battle? ... With what joy I would swap out this humiliating dress [*veste*] for the lustrous armor of the warriors, for a noble steed, for a spear!" (2012, 22).

In this novel, Martí thus wrote a war fantasy in which women are ancillary to and identified by their relations to men: sister or mother to the "illustrious warrior." Their dramaturgical roles are to exemplify the (im)proper conduct of women in times of war: "A Nubian [that is, Cuban] mother is not she who cries if her son soars to the patria's rescue!," says Elmira to her grieving mother (2012, 22). Rather, she, as Elmira has done, sees her brother (or son or husband) off to war with a loving kiss and great pride—if not (penis) envy! In so doing, she subordinates her love of family to that of love for one's Patria and her deeds as woman to that of his as man: *he* redeems the Patria and *she* exalts him for it, not least if he dies in the act. "Battle laurels" and the "crown of martyr" are what await Abdala—never Espirta or Elmira.



Martí's mother, Leonor (Broselianda Hernández), looking at her son behind bars, mortified and beseeching him to disavow his "useless ideals."



Martí's sisters and mother waiting to see the warden and plead for clemency. As in much Cuban historiography on the wars for independence, women only ever assume

auxiliary roles.



Martí's father, Mariano (Rolando Brito), taking on the slave traffickers. Albeit not an *independentista*, Mariano consistently stands by what is just, even at the expense of his job.



La primera carga al machete (1969), critically acclaimed Cuban film. In the wake of the nineteenth century "liberation" wars, the machete came to symbolize rebelliousness, prowess, and sovereignty in the popular imaginary.

In the film *Eye of the Canary*, it is Martí's mother, Leonor, who (hysterically) pleads for her son *not* to wager his life for the Patria. This is no idle drama, for it is precisely her grief, marvelously performed by Broselianda Hernández, that conveys the emotional turmoil and sacrifices that the young Martí had to endure in order to be political. The only other women in the film are Pepe's younger sisters, who are mere bystanders to the drama of Cuba Libre. Women thereby come to symbolize the *antipolitical* (Leonor), the *apolitical* (sisters), or the *erotic* (the Afrocubana). Rarely, if ever, are they called on as *protagonists* for Cuba Libre or as *exemplars* of the ethical. One need only take into account that the young Martí learns all that he knows about justice from his father—*not* his mother. It is Mariano who stands up for the rights of an elder *guarijo* (peasant) in the streets of Havana and the rights of enslaved Africans in Cuba's hinterland. As father and conscientious officer of the law, Mariano is the young Martí's source for the ethical, whereas Leonor is little other than a stoic wife or hysteric mother.

That said, *Eye of the Canary* does break ranks with *Abdala* and Cuban historical cinema in at least one quite extraordinary way, namely its choice to foreground *non-violence* and *civil disobedience*. The young Martí is no "illustrious warrior." He is openly identified as a "dissident," never as a *mambí* and never armed. Neither are any battles nor the Liberation Army ever depicted. Indeed, never once does the (Cuban) viewer see a machete, the most popular of emancipatory symbols in the Cuban imaginary. When Spanish volunteers come knocking aggressively at school rector Mendive's door, the *mambí* rebel Francisco, who is taking refuge in Mendive's home, stands with a pistol at the ready. Nearby stands Martí, with his mentor's newborn baby in his arms—a scene that defies nearly all of Cuba's historiography and historical cinema on the subject of the independence wars. In *Eye of the Canary* violence is never as such the "revolutionary" violence of the *guerrillero*; it is, rather, only ever the repressive violence of an imperial and state apparatus that either executes (Francisco) or imprisons (Martí) dissidents. The viewer does not walk away visually roused by erect phallic objects (machetes, rifles) in the hands of virile men who chant "¡Viva Cuba Libre!" Instead, she or he bears witness to an incarcerated dissident who symbolizes civil disobedience and a cry for democracy.



Rather than a machete, Martí holds an infant—a scene that defies nearly all other films about Cuba's nineteenth century wars for independence.



Francisco, the *mambí*, at his public execution (by garrote). The assembly bears witness to the injustice and riotously cheers him on as he cries out "Long live the insurrection!" Amongst the crowd is the young Martí.

That these are the matters at stake is made evident in the classroom and trial scenes. In class, the young Martí and fellow (male) students debate what the word "democracy" means. Martí's trusty friend, Fermín, defines it in terms of free speech and a free press. Others disagree in a cacophony of yells that Martí silences as he stands and declares that true democracy lies in Yara and with Céspedes forces. The historic Martí did, after all, categorically endorse armed revolt. The film's Martí, however, mainly responds to a prophetic call to speak truth to power. To this end, he *writes* and he *speaks* regardless of the consequences. He writes his play in poetic verse, *Abdala*; publishes his clandestine periodical, *Patria Libre*;



Martí in his (all boys) classroom, identifying “democracy” with the armed revolt in Yara and Céspedes’ forces. The film does not, thereby, disavow violence altogether.



Patria Libre, the first of Martí’s independentista periodicals. It is printed clandestinely in a nod to the rights for free speech and a free press, sensitive topics in socialist Cuba.



Martí speaks out at his trial, “My right to speak has never existed!” But who else does not speak in the film? Where is the people’s assembly?

and stands by his “treasonous” letter. He speaks out at home, in the classroom, and, most dramatically, at his military tribunal, where he defiantly stands and declares: “My right to speak has never existed!” The fact that he does so in a decidedly contemporary vernacular makes his plea all the more lively and salient to today’s Cuban youth.

Yet Cuba’s youth, especially among women and men of color, are not particularly hailed by the film. Not only Martí but also nearly all whom he learns from or with whom he conspires and collaborates are phenotypically white (propertied) men: school rector Mendive, father Mariano, Don Salustiano, best friend Fermín, Manuel de Céspedes, the Villanueva theater director, etc.. Furthermore, the film never equates “democracy” with elections—neither Martí nor any others cry out for their *right to vote*. Martí and his closest allies agitate for and boldly embody a free press, free speech, and, one safely infers, the right to assembly.

In this way, one could argue thus that *Eye of the Canary* is not a call for liberal democracy as much as *participatory* democracy. And in this respect the film (released in 2010) could be read as in touch with a world in which youthful bodies come to overtake plazas (i.e. in Tahir Square, in Spain, in Greece, in Zuccotti Park, etc.) not only to dramatize their grievances against monopolized power but also to enact its alternative, namely democratized power. What has stood out most conspicuously in contemporary activism is the politics of assembly, which *Eye of the Canary* gestures at in the collective and creative ecstasy of the Villanueva Theater. Intellectuals as renowned as Judith Butler (2015) and Michael Hardt and Anotnio Negri (2017) have begun to theorize assembly as a new horizon of emancipatory politics today. And it is intriguing to me that Butler has pointed out that the right to assembly is always haunted by the specter of prison—precisely where the film’s Martí ends. That the film renders *the* national icon a *political* prisoner is, indeed, no idle choice in socialist Cuba, which for years has had to ward off ideologically driven assaults on its “totalitarian” system.

Eye of the Canary’s desacralized Martí, a vulnerable yet venerable Martí with whom everyday Cubans can identity, no doubt opens critical horizons otherwise foreclosed by hagiography and the nationalistic romance with the “Apostle.” Its melancholic aesthetics and youth perspective convey a disillusionment with Cuban reality and a rebellious audacity that is prophetic and non-violent. Importantly, that rebelliousness is not subsumed by calls for sovereignty and patriotic loyalty. Rather, it bespeaks—in contemporary vernacular no less—a call for a free press, free speech, and the right to assembly. Yet the bodies that politically assemble in *Eye of the Canary* are almost exclusively urban white petite bourgeois men and their desires articulated as *political* rights. Conspicuously subdued or altogether absent are Afro-Cubans, Cuban women, and peasant or proletarian Cubans who organize for Cuba Libre and who would likely advocate for *social* and *economic* rights as well. Perhaps Pérez, as a Cuban, can take social and economic rights for granted and, as an artist, has the responsibility to provoke reflections on that which cannot be taken for granted (i.e. free press and rights to assembly).

This may be a sober reminder that the film is one made *by* and *for* Cubans. The irony, however, is that with socialist Cuba’s pragmatic concessions to the neoliberal world system, the social and economic rights of Cubans are no longer as secure or as equitable as they once were. True to Martí’s word, “Cuba Libre” was never merely a cry for due processes or liberties; Cuba Libre embodies expectations of collective welfare. It was to be a Cuba *with all* and *for the good of all*. Judged by these criteria, *Eye of the Canary* welcomingly and imaginatively bids for yet falteringly enacts the desires called “democracy” and “Cuba Libre.”

Perhaps, however, one could never satisfactorily translate into words, images, or a story such desires as bountiful as these. Perhaps, as with *Eye of the Canary*, one can only point to horizons that await our elaborations, however fallible yet necessary.

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Notes

1. *¡Nubia venció! Muero feliz: la muerte/poco me importa, pues logré salvarla.../ ¡Oh, qué dulce es morir cuando se muere/Luchando audaz por defender la patria!* José Martí, *Abdala*. (Barcelona: Red Ediciones, S.L., 2012), 24. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. *No temaís una muerte gloriosa, que morir por la patria es vivir*. Lyrics, sheet music, and historical information can be found at: https://www.ecured.cu/La_bayamesa. It is said that Perucho cried out that very verse as he faced his death by firing squad.

3. Quoted in Rafael Rojas, “Otro gallo cantaría: Essay on the First Cuban Republicanism,” in *The Cuban Republic and José Martí: Reception and Use of a National Symbol*, eds. Mauricio Font & Alfonso Quiroz (Lexington Books, 2006), 9.

4. The exact quote reads: “I lived in the monster, and I know its entrails—and my sling is the sling of David.” José Martí, “Letter to Manuel Mercado,” in *José Martí: Selected Writings*, ed. Roberto González Echevarría (Penguin Classics, 2002), 347.

5. See: Julio García Espinosa, “For an Imperfect Cinema,” (1969) reprinted in *La doble moral del cine* (Eiciones Voluntad, 1995) and in English (translation by Julianne Burton) in *New Latin American Cinema, Volume 1*, ed. Michael Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 71-82. Also see: Ana Lopez, “Cuba,” In *The Cinema of Small Nations*, edited by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petri (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 179-96. [[return to page 2](#)]

6. For excellent accounts on the cultural effects of the “Special Period,” see: Ariana Hernández-Reguant, ed. *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); José Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

7. *Eye of the Canary* was not, however, initiated by director Pérez, ICAIC, or the Cuban Communist Party. *Eye of the Canary* is one installment in a series of eight films on Latin American “liberators.” Proposed by Spanish actor Sancho Gracia and producer José María Morales, the films are (financially) backed by Spanish cultural institutions and state bodies, but each is co-produced by a filmmaker (and crew) from the respective country i.e. as in the cases of the Venezuelan Luis Alberto Lamata’s *Bolívar, hombre de dificultades* (2013) and the Mexican Antonio Serrano’s *Hidalgo, la historia jamás contada* (2010).

8. The film’s title, *The White Rose*, is drawn from Martí’s *Versos sencillos* (1891):

Cultivo una rosa blanca,/En julio como en enero,/Para el amigo sincero/Que me da su mano franca. Y para el cruel que me arranca/El corazón con que vivo,/Cardo ni oruga cultivo/Cultivo una rosa blanca.

[I tend to a white rose/In July as in January,/For that true friend/Who offers his frank hand to me. And to the cruel one who tears out/The heart by which I live,/Thistle nor thorn do I give:/For him, too, I have a white rose.]

[\[return to page 3\]](#)

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Promotional poster for Irene Lusztig's *Yours in Sisterhood* (2018).

Feminist re-voicings in *Yours in Sisterhood*

by [Tessa Dwyer](#)

In a scene towards the end of Irene Lusztig's 2018 documentary *Yours in Sisterhood*, a woman in Cincinnati, Ohio stands facing the camera as she reads out a letter sent to the first American mainstream feminist magazine *Ms.*. In the letter, a *Ms.* reader from 1977 argues that racial divides within the feminist movement must be put aside in order to focus effectively on the crisis of gender. Afterwards, the Cincinnati woman pauses, still looking directly into the camera, until an offscreen voice asks her: "What does it feel like to have those words in your body"? It feels "weird and hard," she responds, "to be repeating this, because I don't agree with it." She describes the experience as "a little bit violent, actually." Structurally, the scene varies little from others within this slowly unfolding film, all involving similar acts of letter reading, yet small variances speak pointedly about issues of difference, identification and belonging. The exchange in this scene seems to sum up the film's complex form of address and central encounter with vocal strangeness.

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| Letter reader in Cincinnati, Ohio. | Offscreen, the filmmaker asks a question. |
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| Letter reader in Mason City, Iowa. | A letter is read using signing and an interpreter. |

After extensive research at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard, reading through thousands of letters sent in to *Ms.* by readers, from its launch in 1972 up until 1980, Lusztig curated a sample and then spent three years travelling across the country, visiting those locations from where the selected letters came. In each



Filmmaker Lutzig in front of *Ms.* magazine covers.

small or large town, a local resident reads the letter to camera, aided by a teleprompter. Most of the letters uncovered were never published and only occasionally are letters traced back to their writers. For the most part, those in front of the camera revoice letters written from women unknown to them, from decades past, offering a strangely effecting, intimate engagement with both absence and presence, time and feminist historiography.



A letter is read by its original writer, Yvonne.



Again, a letter is read by its original writer, Claudia.

The vocal otherness that this film continually rehearses springs from its epistolary format of people reading aloud other people's letters or, in certain cases, their own, from years back. In doing so, the letter readers are made to embody alien, unfamiliar and/or distanced words, and the effect is surprisingly unsettling. These acts of re-speaking make the past newly present, registering continuities as well as points of remove and disconnect. In an interview by Megan Moodie, Lutzig comments that the "drama of the film is in the present and in the ways that readers negotiate with the past in real time." [1] [\[open endnotes in new page\]](#) Exploring "history in the present tense," as Lutzig puts it, a confronting scene involves a letter from Greensboro, North Carolina, which speaks of Ku Klux Klan paraphernalia on display at a public library, as well as Klansmen themselves. Noting how the Klan recently took part in a public parade celebrating Trump's 2016 election win, the letter reader insists such issues are not merely 'in the past', but rather, are firmly located in the present.



A letter is read from Greensboro, North Carolina, where Klan paraphernalia was on display in the public library.



Letter reader from Greensboro who talks about the Klan in 2016 parading for Trump.

Those who read the letters stand or sit outside, on streets, in parks or yards, in front of houses, buildings, dwellings. They give these letters new life, an airing, opening and offering them up to new ears, audiences, addressees. And yet the readers also speak to us from *their* place, the place from whence the letter also



A lingering shot of a church in Bowling Green, Ohio.



Letter reading is punctuated by shots of outdoor spaces and roads.



Playback is a technique common to musicals, allowing Marni Nixon's singing to substitute for that of Deborah Kerr in *The King and I* (1956), Natalie Wood in *West Side Story* (1961) and Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* (1964), amongst others.

issues. The camera lingers on outdoor spaces and the roads that connect them. This marking and sharing of locations holds much significance. In such a sparse film, it becomes doubly present. Lusztig talks of her interest in a public, shared feminism, as she brings to light archived letters, personal and intimate despite their address to unknown readers and future feminisms.[2]

By making cinema strange and inviting its deconstruction through documentary, Lusztig insists upon this process as a vital means of expanding the feminist project: making strange, inviting scrutiny and double takes. Drawing attention to the embodied, situated nature of speech, she tunes into voices past and mostly as yet unheard. Putting other people's words into new mouths, she tests distinctions between the written and the spoken, between letters and cine-writing.

The effect reminds me of initial reactions to speech in cinema as something uncanny during the transition period from Silents to Talkies, especially when dubbing or voice doubling was involved. Jorge Luis Borges once described dubbing as a "malignant artifice" involving "the arbitrary insertion of another voice and of another language." [3] For Borges, "worse than dubbing, worse than the substitution that dubbing implies, it is the awareness of a substitution or deception."

Although in Lusztig's film, the words we hear are voiced by those we see on screen, with no deception involved, substitution occurs nevertheless; readers stand in for writers and speaking bodies fill in for those who are absent, activating their thoughts and subjectivity as well as their voice. Indeed, this substitution is central to the film's rationale and Lusztig's project.

For Borges, dubbing points to the inherent limitations or decadence of cinema as an "art of combination." [4] In *Yours in Sisterhood*, cinema's proclivity for audio-visual combination is handled with care and generosity. Its inherent split between sound and image is put to work, engendering new forms of listening, witnessing and engaging. Lusztig's film works the split, making us aware of film and writing alike as modes of mediated disembodiment and letters as urgent missives, reading as writing, gendered voice, of cinema as language; personal yet public, continually evolving and always undergoing forms of translation. Lusztig ponders such modes of meaning-making in order to revisit feminist voicings, enabling us to hear voice anew precisely due to layers of mediation, recombination and substitution.

To an extent, the letter reading at the heart of *Yours in Sisterhood* is reminiscent of the "playback techniques" common to musicals where sound recording is primary, with scenes built around pre-recorded songs to which actors mould their lips (see Siefert 1995). [5] Yet, instead of alien voices fitting themselves to on-screen bodies and lips—as occurs in 'normal' dubbing—those who read out the letters must mould their bodies, faces, expressions and lips to match the words of a stranger, or words made strange. The film enacts a form of dubbing in reverse. This *undubbing* produces visceral effects: a faltering or stumbling over words, feelings of return or foreshadowing, simultaneously moments of continuity and disjunction; at points, a sense of violence or intrusion.

Tensions emerge as Lusztig holds the camera on her subjects, stretching the present and producing uncomfortable pauses and silences, looks away, sighs and



The camera fixes upon a remand centre yard in Indianapolis, Indiana as a letter is read in voice-over. The remand centre is surrounded by barbed wire.

gestures; we see the body talking, unshackled from voice. After the letter readers have placed themselves in the service of words not their own, a transition occurs. As they contemplate this act, a shift occurs as they begin speaking on *their* terms, in *their* words. Our attention relaxes as their voices settle back into a comfortable habitus, at home and at ease. As audiences, we hear and listen differently when this me-voice speaks. We cease scrutinizing the image and holding it up for dissection. We fall back upon an easy identification with this unified body-voice presence, content to listen and be spoken to.

Yet, as Michel Chion observes, voice conventions on screen are far from 'natural' and any sense of unification is illusory, disavowing sound cinema's very severing of voice from body and sound from image, each traditionally inscribed on different surfaces. The "more you think about synchronization," states Chion, "the more aware you can become.. of the arbitrariness of this convention, which tries to present as a unity something that from the outset 'doesn't stick together'." [6] For Chion as well as Rick Altman, Mary Ann Doane and Mikhail Yamplosky, dubbing is neither anomalous nor degenerate; rather, it constitutes sound cinema's very core. [7]

But just as we are apt to forget the mediated, severed nature of screen voice as soon as these acts of letter reading are over, a final letter is read in voice-over as the camera fixes upon a remand centre in Indianapolis, Indiana, surrounded by barbed wire fencing. We are starkly reminded of bodies behind walls, out-of-sight and unheard. Here, the cinema's schism between body and voice is foregrounded, reverberating against other forms of social and political alienation. Luszti's carefully staged re-voicings of *Ms.* magazine letters contributes an introspective and nuanced take on feminism and society, past and present, always prioritising whilst making strange filmmaking as a form of giving voice.

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Notes

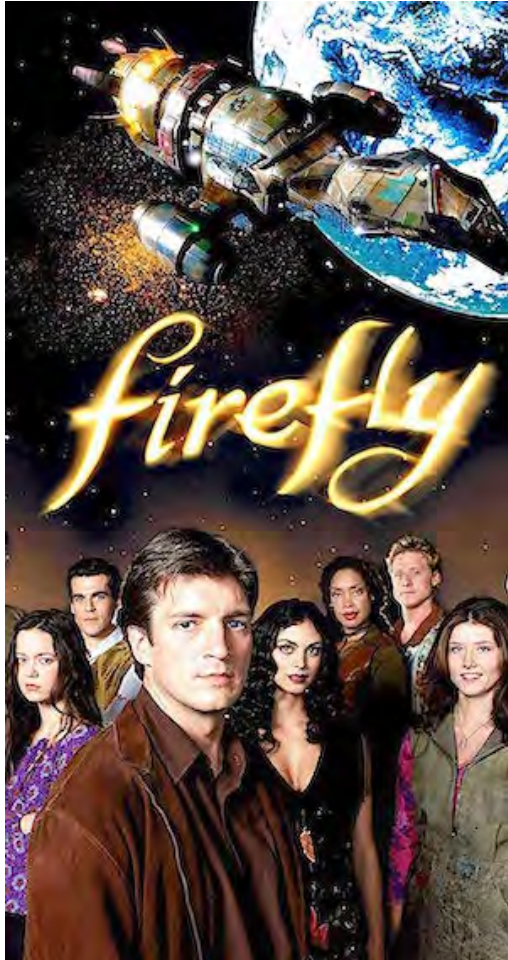
1. See, Megan Moodie's interview with Lusztig: Moodie, "Handmade feminism: Irene Lusztig's *Yours in Sisterhood*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 11, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/handmade-feminism-irene-lusztigs-yours-in-sisterhood#!> [[return to text](#)]
2. Moodie, "Handmade."
3. See, Jorge Luis Borges, "On Dubbing", translated from the Spanish by Calin-Andrei Mihailescu, in 'Borges Night at the Movies', in *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, edited by Atom Egoyan and Ian Balour, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Alphabet City Media, 2004: 11-120.
4. Borges, "On Dubbing."
5. On song dubbing and playback techniques, see Marsha Siefert, "Image/usic/Voice: Song Dubbing in Hollywood Musicals," *Journal of Communication* 45 (2): 44-64; and Tessa Dwyer, "Undoing Dubbing: *Singin' in the Rain*," in *Reassessing Dubbing*, edited by Irene Ranzato and Serenella Zanotti, John Benjamins VP, 2019: 17-39.
6. See, Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, translated from the French by Claudia Gorbmann, Columbia University Press, 1999: 126.
7. Chion, *Voice*; Rick Altman, "Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1), 1980: 67-79; Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1), 1980: 33-50; Mikhail Yampolsky, "Voice Devoured: Artaud and Borges on Dubbing," *October* 64, 1993: 57-77.



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Captions cite Dennis Broe's "Birth of the Binge."



"...[F]ollowing the militarization of American television after 9/11...it has been the serial model that artists have most employed to oppose television's domestic 'War on Terror.'"



"The drive toward artificial intelligence, while

A materialist phenomenology of TV in the age of the hyper-seriality

review by [Mike Wayne](#)

Dennis Broe, *Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and The End of Leisure*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2019.

Dennis Broe's *Birth of the Binge* is a fascinating and thought-provoking synthesis of critical methods that produces an all-too-rare materialist phenomenology of television, here focusing on the recent transformations in seriality. The sub-title of the book, *The End of Leisure*, immediately strikes one as provocatively counter-intuitive. Surely, watching television and leisure *are* synonymous? In fact, leisure time under capitalism is a deeply ambiguous social experience, and it is one of the merits of this book to really explore this.

The book's argument is structured into three parts. Part one, called 'Metaseriality' considers the broader social, economic, political and industrial structures that have shaped television from its initial emergence to what Broe contends are new forms of hyper-seriality (essentially a further round of capitalist colonisation of culture). The second part of the book 'Serial Specificity' is made up of two chapters. The first explores the concept of seriality in philosophical discourses and cultural antecedents (including the novel and film) going back well before the technology of television. Broe skilfully weaves a number of television serials into this broader discussion of, for example, Nietzsche and Zola, including an extensive discussion of *The Fugitive* (1963-67) as a case study of a series that both typified serial tv in its time while also anticipating later trends. In the next chapter Broe explores the formal specificity of contemporary serial television, using *Justified* (2010-15) as a case study. In the final part of the book, 'Serial Auteurs and the Possibilities of Industrial Resistance' Broe turns to the concept of authorship to explore the extent to which the new serial form, within the industrial capitalist logics of the production context, can be used to advance a cultural politics that challenges dominant ideological formations. Here Broe takes Joss Whedon's *Firefly* and *Dollhouse* as examples of a critique against authoritarianism and militarism. He also turns to J.J. Abrams' notably short-lived efforts *Revolution* (2012-14) and *Believe* (2014) as examples of the possibilities and limits of resistant practices.

For those of us at a certain age, television is synonymous with the 'Golden Age' of regulated capitalism that was widely known as Keynesianism. More so than film—if by 'film' we mean a distinct apparatus of production, distribution, exhibition and consumption outside the home—television implants itself in our early life and memories, a familiar and ever-present co-presence in our daily rituals and family interactions. For me, watching *Lost in Space* on the black and white television in my parents' room with my sister, remains a powerful affective image floating up somewhere from the past. Perhaps the role of television in our early experiences may be one reason why the medium seems to so often disarm critical discourse in

suggesting a melding of human and machine as depicted in series such as *Altered Carbon*, is also in the logic of capital a frantic effort to move automation from unemploying workers in the service industry to also unemploying highly skilled workers such as surgeons.”



Silicon Valley — “The arc in the show is constructed on the success or failure of the start-up ... [which] replaces the character change and romantic ups and downs of the traditional sitcom.”



Lost “exhibit[s] the structure of feeling of life under the capitalist neoliberal order where civilization and the natural world are breaking down.”

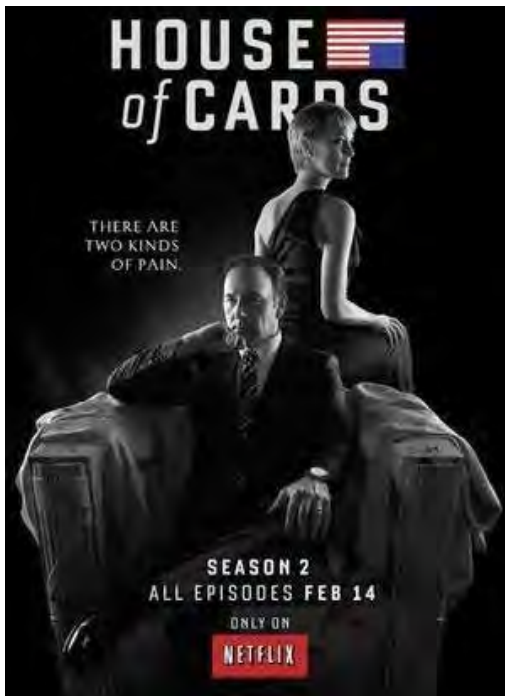
academic literature and why a cultural populism and barely concealed fanzine mentality still fighting yesterday’s war against high cultural elitism, remains prevalent, although thankfully absent in Broe’s contribution to the scholarly literature.

Those fragments of memories floating up and their imbrication with the cultural texts that the medium mediates, constitute what Bernard Stiegler calls *tertiary retention*. Stiegler, the French phenomenological philosopher of technology and experience, provides Broe with a key resource in his conceptual architecture. Stiegler defines primary retention as sense perception, secondary retention as the filtering of sense perception through memory and tertiary retention as mass media experiences that become ‘technologies of memory’ (p.18). Stiegler calls the current era one of hyper industrialization—the extension of the kind of logics that dominated the Fordist capitalist economy into the digital economy and through that into the inner recesses of our subjectivity. The spread of mass media increases the power of tertiary retentions in our lives, never more so than in the daily consumption of television.

Seriality, the powerful new form for television drama, is defined both as a mode of distribution and consumption. Broe also lays out its formal structures such as multi-character narratives, generic hybridity, self-reflexivity, complex temporal arrangements, and story arcs lasting a season or even the entire series. Such seriality cultivates a new mode of reception known in the vernacular as ‘binge watching’.

A danger lurking for Broe in his use of this term and others such as ‘addiction’ and ‘apathy’, is that he may be skirting perilously close to the kind of class-connoted opprobrium of earlier discourses on television that I suggested above have been definitively eclipsed. That older discourse also used notions of ‘addictions’ or ‘zombie’ tv viewers who were ‘brain dead’. Perhaps European hackles might rise faster in this regard than U.S. ones. Indeed my initial hesitations around this language of addictions were initially reinforced by early intimations that Broe was going to argue that television as the extension of the logic of capital was also contested by the figure of the writer and/or director. Broe might have more explicitly distinguished his project from these earlier struggles for distinction around high and low culture since any similarities between his book and those earlier models are in fact superficial. Instead, Broe’s discourse maintains a necessary ambivalence: attraction and repulsion, positive and negative, affirmation of possibilities, critique of many of the standard practices and norms. Television is made in fact for dialectical analysis.

Broe achieves this theoretical swerve around the habitus of an older middle-class distaste for television by combining Stiegler’s phenomenological analysis with critical political economy. In a highly unusual move, Broe insists that the television audience is also and always a worker or dependent on the wage-labour economy. The viewer’s dual identity allows Broe to map out links between the audience of U.S. television and the fate of the U.S. worker in the last fifty years or so. Broe notes that prices on key goods for well-being such as education, health care and food are increasing while prices in virtual and digital entertainments are falling—perhaps as a symbolic compensation for real world scarcity as jobs decline, precarity rises and real incomes fall. By 2015, a majority of U.S. workers were approaching or were actually below the poverty line (p.41). The once stable television schedules that helped structure family life around children’s time, family time and adult time, have exploded along with the neo-liberal decimation of the family itself. It is in this sense that the book’s subtitle about the ‘end of leisure’ comes to make sense. Certainly it’s the end of one mode of leisure and its re-fitting to a new modality of life within capitalism. Leisure as *secure free time* has indeed been eroded. Today ‘leisure is being filtered through and fitted to



House of Cards, Game of Thrones, Billions depict “a frantic acceleration of the neoliberal praxis of every person for themselves and all against all in a world where power reigns supreme.”

work.’ (p.53). Television as streamed service accommodates the new reconfiguration of ‘leisure’, snatched on the go via mobile devices or late at night:

‘time shifting, a boon to the consumer, is often necessary for the harried worker...for whom prime time’s three-hour block of leisure has long since disappeared’ (p. 109).

I personally would have liked to have seen Broe expand and explore in more detail his thesis on the destruction of leisure as a relaxed experience clearly demarcated from work. There is for example a sociological literature that could have reinforced the philosophical and political economy mapping of this experience and which indicates that while the quantity of leisure time has increased, the sense for survey respondents is that the quality of the leisure time has decreased, as [‘Americans report feeling increasingly harried now compared with 40 years ago.’](#) Broe’s argument about how the new formal strategies of serial television build on past techniques to ‘hook’ audiences into the series could also have explored a sense of entrapment viewers sometimes feel. They may simultaneously realise they have both committed valuable leisure time to a series *and also* have concluded that (as with so many products of the capitalist culture industry) it actually is not very satisfying and probably not worth carrying on—yet, they feel pressure to continue because of their prior temporal investments.

The language of television as addiction and as a kind of consumer equivalent to and extension of the logic of capitalist accumulation is explored further in a fascinating chapter on autism. Broe argues that approximating the condition of autism, exemplified by the Sheldon Cooper character from *The Big Bang Theory*, ‘is more and more subliminally implied as an appropriate response to the intolerable conditions of the contemporary conjuncture’ (p.72). Relational patterns and even our neural pathways are being reconfigured as certain skills and capacities are downgraded (such as being able to empathise and relate to people) and others upgraded (such as obsessive-compulsive focus on work problems). Unfortunately this trend will only have been reinforced by the Covid-19 crisis.



Orphan Black contains all the “narrative tropes that combine to form the new seriality, including an acceleration of genre hybridity; multiple timeframes, consisting of flashbacks, -forward, and -sideways; and layering of the narrative that may include reflexivity in the service of a continuing metanarrative.”

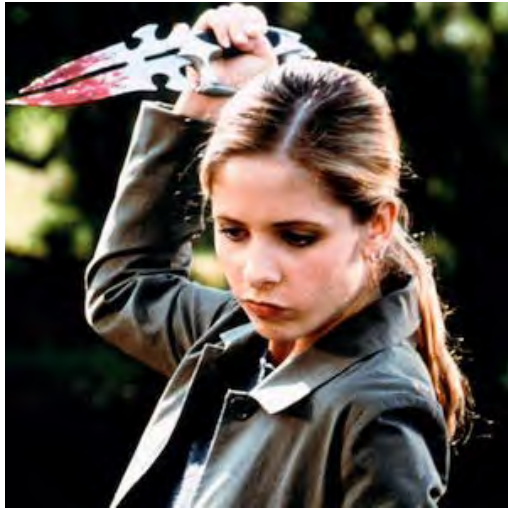
Shifting to narratological analysis, Broe points to the fundamental ambivalence of television seriality. It at once extends the logic of hyper-industrial capital yet provides resources through which cultural-expressive forms can reflect critically on their own conditions of emergence. Broe traces the development of seriality back to earlier literary forms, Monet’s serial paintings on subjects, and the emergence of serialization in comic strips, radio, film and early television.



Elizabeth Moss in “*Top of the Lake* — the first radical-feminist series on television.”

Broe cites Gramsci to cast seriality as a war of position between creative talent and the networks, but more substantively he explores different philosophical understandings of seriality to suggest philosophical-political options. Seriality can mean something like Nietzsche’s ‘eternal return’ in which patterns of repetition with superficial differences amount to ‘seriality as capitalist mundanity’ (p.8). Alternatively, Sartre has a more ambivalent conceptualization of seriality as both commodified fragmentation and potential emergence of collective identity. This is used ‘to describe the constant battle between art and commerce in the commercial television arena’ (p.141). The formal complexities of serial television can be used to

‘critique the society as a whole in mapping the totality of social experience or, whether under the sway of the network or streaming service, to veer towards a simple repetitious eternal return.’ (p.174).



"There are several key characteristics that define Joss Whedon as an auteur-showrunner, all of which come to prominence in his first series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." ... *Buffy*, *Firefly*, and *Dollhouse* create specific metaphors that have to do with combatting, surviving, and adapting to new elements of masculinist terror."

This struggle can be seen in the first season series that breaks the mould and does something critical, only to be tamed and made ideologically safe from the second season onwards, as in the cases of *Arrow* and *Hell on Wheels*.

The final part of the book is devoted to the key agents that can turn seriality as eternal return into seriality as a critique of capitalist logics. They are the 'showrunners', the key drivers behind the series concept, typically writers and/or directors. This marks a welcome return to questions of authorship and the relative power that accrues to certain talent that has become 'hot' i.e. that creates in capital a certain dependence on it, since creative talent has what capital does not. This is what I have called, adapting Marx, *creative variable capital* (labour power in its qualitative and not merely its quantitative dimension) that might produce use values critical of the system while producing (exchange) value for it at the same time.

Broe's own formulation of this is in terms of Fredric Jameson's notion of 'the author in discourse'—which tries to find a point of mediation between the old bourgeois isolated artist transcending their context on the one hand and the other extreme of the death of the author in favour of merely discursive codes on the other. Broe's version of the 'author in discourse' sees the author as

'a mediator of overlapping discourses where the individual facts of his or her life involve these imbrications in political, aesthetic, philosophical and historical representations that are expressed in their work.' (p.213).

Broe explores the author in discourse in relation to the work of Joss Wheedon and J.J Abrams. Broe concludes appropriately with a dialectical model in which serial television is conceived as both 'palliative' and critique, 'with a Nietzschean serial current moving toward perpetual (and addictive) repetition and a Hegelian current moving toward a more progressive definition of a totality for the purpose of understanding' (p.246). Unlike many a Netflix series, *The Birth of the Binge* is certainly worth the investment in consumption time.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



This is one of the most well-known pictures taken during the Umbrella Movement protests. The young man raising his umbrella as police fired tear gas to disperse protesters became an iconic image of the movement.



During the Umbrella Movement, hundreds of tents were set up by protesters outside the government headquarters in Hong Kong. Many of them had addresses such as "2 Democracy Avenue" or "Tent #22, Occupation Zone," to which the post office actually delivered letters.



Established and emerging filmmakers in Hong Kong: a generational tug-of-war

by [Fangyu Chen](#)

From 2014 to 2015, I was working in a film company in Hong Kong and busy with the production of a large-budget action film jointly produced by Hong Kong and mainland Chinese companies. We had an international core production team. The cinematographer was from the U.S., and his assistant was an Australian. Our second assistant director was Singaporean of Malaysian extraction, while the team managing the unmanned aerial vehicles came from Taiwan. Besides Hong Kong, the project was also shot in multiple locales, including Shanghai, Taiwan and Thailand. In each place, the production team was primarily comprised of a large number of locally recruited film workers, led by a small group of department heads and their assistants who were mostly Hong Kong film practitioners.

The production stage happened to coincide with the course of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, a 79-day political protest demanding universal suffrage in the elections to pick the city's top leader. The appeal later escalated into a protest against the political interference and impaired freedom of speech imposed by the Chinese government, as well as against the constant influx of mainland tourists and immigrants. Throughout the city, the conflict between Hong Kong and the mainland became a matter of heated public debate.

Every day after work, some of the Hong Kong staff, usually the younger ones, would pack and go to the demonstration sites, spend nights sleeping in tents there and return to work the next day. As a co-production, part of the shooting had to be done in mainland China, so no matter what political controversies were embroiling their hometown, or their personal beliefs about those controversies, these filmmakers had to travel north to work. Later, with my increasing contact with more Hong Kong film practitioners, both established and emerging ones, I gradually perceived that the current young generation is developing their filmmaking ideas entirely different from, or even in opposition to, the previous generation of filmmakers, those who contributed to the huge successes of Hong Kong cinema in its Golden Age from the 1970s to the early 1990s. The young ones, situated in a labour market in which most of the employment opportunities are created by co-productions or mainland productions, have very complex and largely negative sentiments towards the so-called "Chinese Motherland." The career options for some of these young people, confined to working in Hong Kong by their aversion to China's politics or/and culture, are limited to the local labour market with scant employment opportunities, most of which are only available in low- and medium-budget productions.

Surveys have revealed that young people in Hong Kong nowadays are highly motivated to participate in civic activities. In the Umbrella Movement, a significant number of protesters were secondary school students. Joshua Wong, Nathan Law and Alex Chow (L to R) are three prominent student leaders in the movement and were 19, 23 and 25 years old respectively.

This experience was the inspiration for my writing a series of papers, of which this is the first. In order to trace the contours of discrepancies between established and emerging filmmakers, in 2018, I conducted 47 in-depth interviews with Hong Kong film practitioners. Through snowball sampling, I first reached out to colleagues in the film company I previously worked for, as well as my previous classmates in the Film Academy of Hong Kong Baptist University. Later on, I expanded the search area for interviewees through referrals from these original respondents.

Demographic investigation of the respondents shows that 13 were of the generation who entered film production between the 1970s and the 1980s and are still active in the industry. In this paper, I refer to them as the “established generation” or the “older generation.” Within this group, some directors are considered participants in the “Hong Kong New Wave Cinema” that occurred between the late 1970s to 1980s, whom I also describe as the “baby boomer New Wave filmmakers.” Interviewees from the current young generation, intriguingly, can be divided into two groups, the first being those young people who have struggled in the film industry for some time, only starting to gain a foothold in this very precarious business recently. They are primarily the post-80s generation and have a relatively less radical political stance towards mainland China. These 16 young film practitioners have widely diverse occupations within the industry, including directors, producers, actors, cinematographers, assistant directors, production assistants, set coordinators, assistant editor, and more.

The other group is younger and greener. Some are freshly graduated from film schools and have recently entered the industry, while others are working part-time in the crews while studying in film-related courses. These youngsters primarily belong to the post-90s generation and tend to have more rebellious opinions regarding Hong Kong/Mainland relations. Among the 18 young interviewees who are currently studying, some attend three universities in Hong Kong, including the Film Academy of Hong Kong Baptist University, the School of Film and Television in Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, and the Communication and Crossmedia programme (film track) in Chu Hai College of Higher Education. Their education levels vary from Higher Diploma (diploma in vocational education) to postgraduate degree. In my research, I refer to interviewees from the post-80s and the post-90s generations as the “young generation.” Some of these directors can also be classified as “Hong Kong SAR New Wave” filmmakers, a term on which I will elaborate later.

The three groups of respondents generally represent three perspectives:

- that of the established film practitioners, who have a vested interest in the current co-production situation;
- that of the emerging young film practitioners, who above all crave a flourishing local film market and whose productions exhibit stronger Hong Kong cultural identities;
- lastly, that of the film students, who were predominantly born in the 1990s and have the most extreme views against mainland China and whose filmmaking ideologies and practices foreshadow the future of the industry.

These interviews, combined with data gathered from multiple resources, form the data set from which the conclusions of this paper are drawn.

I interviewed both established and young film practitioners individually in a face-to-face setting in order to yield the best information. Considering that young students may be subject to peer pressure, especially since the research

topic involves each individual's political stance, which could be a sensitive topic, a few pilot interviews were conducted with each on a one-on-one basis first. When my identity as a mainlander seemed to be hindering them from expressing themselves on questions related to Hong Kong/Mainland relations, I instead adopted a focus group model, which encouraged more open discussion and conversation. The interviews were semi-structured, with a duration that normally spanned 1.5 to 2 hours (though the longest one lasted for 6 hours). On top of 20 standard questions, more topics were developed in the course of the interview, which tended to flow naturally from what preceded. In this way, I also discovered hidden themes. Immediately after each interview, I wrote summaries and later transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. Before the next interview, these transcripts were tentatively analysed to adjust questions, and the way of asking them. In the final stage, I organized all the data with the help of Nvivo Software to link what the respondent said to the concepts and categories that appeared, thus could establish the patterns, categories and themes that follow.

To better understand the emerging young generation of Hong Kong film practitioners, I needed to draw a contrast between them and their predecessors. That older generation contributed to the prosperity and stellar reputation of Hong Kong Cinema from the 1970s to early 1990s, and they had joined the then flourishing film market and worked under circumstances that were entirely different than those of the young generation. Nevertheless, before we start such comparisons, I must also indicated the context, scope and criteria that I employ in order to justify the division into these two clusters.

Filmmakers as two clusters: established and young generations

The filmmakers being studied in this paper are those who are generally considered “commercial” and who work in the Hong Kong cinema, deemed an industrialized business sector. In reality, it is problematic to draw a clear line between mainstream/commercial and independent filmmakers in Hong Kong, particularly after the new millennium when Hong Kong cinema entered the co-production era.

Independent film in the United States is typically considered to be work made outside major Hollywood studios. As Ortner puts it, it is “the antithesis of a Hollywood studio film” (2012:2) [[open reference page in new window](#)] and several contrasts can be drawn between the two: Hollywood films are aimed at entertaining, money making, while independent ones tend to deal with more serious subject matters, usually more political and critical; Hollywood films are normally big-budgeted whereas independent ones are low-budgeted; the former classically have happy endings, while the latter rarely do. But admittedly, there is no clear binary contrast between them – a Hollywood film could be low-budget and thought-provoking, and an independent one could well aim to be lucrative.

In retrospect, Hong Kong's large-scaled film studios such as Shaw Brothers, Cathay, and Golden Harvest, dominated film production on the island city from the 1950s to the 1980s. Outside of these big studios, there remained room for non-mainstream filmmaking. Local independent productions emerged first in the 1960s, flourished in the 1970s, fell silent in the 1980s with the prosperity of Hong Kong commercial filmmaking, and were resuscitated in the 1990s thanks to the sponsorship from Hong Kong Arts Development Council, which was set up to support the development of arts in the territory (Cheung, 2010 & Cheung, Marchetti, and Tan, 2010). The



Vincent Chui is an indie filmmaker in Hong Kong and one of the founders of the non-profit film organization Ying e Chi. The organization has been helping young directors obtain theatrical releases in Hong Kong for their political films.



Ann Hui is a typical Hong Kong film director who juggles between making independent films and commercial films. Her works are often both critically acclaimed and commercially successful.



Herman Yau has directed more than 80 films, including commercial and indie ones, since he joined the industry in the mid-1980s. As a prolific and versatile director, he claims himself to be an opportunist who first convinces investors with fancy data on return on investment, and then makes the films however he wants.

established generation I refer to in this paper is the group of mainstream filmmakers that was working in the industry in the Golden Age of 1980s and early 1990s before the industry went into decline.

Outside of the world of commercial filmmaking, there exists a group of established filmmakers who have enriched Hong Kong cinema with their alternative filmmaking styles and ideologies. People such as Yu Lik-wai, Vincent Chui, Yan Yan Mak, Miu-suet Lai, Wah-chuen Lam, Yau Ching and more, came to the fore in the 1990s and often made their first independent feature films with subsidies from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. It was relatively easier to demarcate the independent filmmakers from the mainstream ones during the Golden Age of Hong Kong cinema, when film production was highly commercialised. In contrast, the line dividing them now seems rather nebulous and contestable since the industry's decline at the beginning of the new millennium.

The very concept of "independent filmmaking" has received much criticism. Kempton (2010) put forward a series of questions as to what independent filmmaking is: is it marked by a lack of major studio support, the film's nonmainstream appeal, the director's indifference to the box office performance, or the aesthetics or subject matter films deal with? Not to mention the fact that filmmaking is a teamwork with tens or hundreds of people's efforts, and an incredibly costly activity that involves many forms of investment from governments, foundations, corporations, private investors and more. Additionally, a distribution system has to deliver the film to local and world audiences. Kempton exclaims that, "no film is an island" (2010:95). With these multiple inter-dependencies, how could a film or a filmmaker ever be called independent?

The situation is particularly intricate in Hong Kong. Some films that purportedly proclaim themselves independent were made with the help of commercial film celebrities, such as *The Runaway Pistol* (2002, dir. Wah-chuen Lam) (see Cheung, 2010:34). Some independent filmmakers themselves had substantial experience working in the film industry before their own independent filmmaking. Finally, some works were made by filmmakers who juggle both independent and commercial filmmaking. Fruit Chan, Ann Hui, Stanley Kwan and Herman Yau are outstanding representatives of this group of people, who are described by Ackbar Abbas as "occupying an in-between space between art and commerce" and who while "working in the industry maintain an 'intimate' but 'critical' relationship with the commercial film culture in which they are situated" (see Cheung, 2009:8-9). Consequently, Cheung argues that, independent cinema in Hong Kong should not be understood as a totality that is self-sufficient and isolated from more commercial cinema, but instead, one should recognize that they "influence each other thematically and stylistically" (Cheung, 2009:8 & Cheung, 2010).

In the interviews Cheung (2010) did with Hong Kong independent filmmakers, they claimed the concept of "independence" was a spirit or an attitude. Yan Yan Mak said, "We insist on making our own films" and "Hong Kong audiences should start to understand the 'independent spirit' rather than the term 'independent film'" (see Cheung, 2010:130), and Vincent Chui describes it as an attitude that "if you won't let me make the film, I'll do it

myself" (see Cheung, 2010:130). Kempton (2010) aptly sees that this independence

“originates less from the production side — i.e., a lack of studio financing — and more from the independent community’s self-styled imaginative construction of the independent film ideal, a counterpublic embodying the so-called ‘indie spirit’ through attempts to define itself as distinct from the mainstream” (Kempton, 2010:95).



Yan Yan Mak is a Hong Kong-based female director who has won several awards for her indie films. Since 2005, she has been collaborating with Hong Kong Cantopop singer Denise Ho to produce music videos and direct Ho's live concerts. Ho has become one of the Umbrella Movement's most outspoken celebrity supporters and has, therefore, been blacklisted by the Government of China.

In Hong Kong, as Lee argues, the “counterpublicness” independent films perform is a “essential quality of ‘friction’ against a dominant public “ (2013:9-10) and a “site of resistance to the double hegemony of the national and the colonial that characterizes Hong Kong’s peculiar coloniality” (Lee, 2013:5). Thus, it is from the ideological level, the “independent spirit” or “counterpublicness” that independent films possess, that scholars typically draw the line between commercial films and independent films, instead of a set of more objective conditions, due to the difficulties discussed above.

Since the new millennium, it is increasingly impossible to clarify the line of demarcation between mainstream and non-mainstream films. As Szeto & Chen see it, contemporary Hong Kong cinema is facing a major ontological crisis that is causing an overall transformation in Hong Kong’s film production, labour structure, industrial behaviour and more. The overwhelming power emanating from mainland China gives unprecedented importance to the mainland film market for Hong Kong filmmakers (Szeto and Chen, 2012). The “mainlandization” of the Hong Kong film industry, as Szeto and Chen have termed it (2012:116-117), has marginalized local film production to the level that a preponderance of local productions, if not all of them, are increasingly exhibiting features that were widely considered to be hallmarks of independent filmmaking:

- small budgets;
- the involvement of very few big media companies;
- themes and subject matters relating to the quotidian life of local citizens and the lower classes;
- typically poor box office returns;
- an attempt to arouse public awareness instead of providing entertainment; among others.

The outflow of Golden Age Hong Kong film practitioners to the mainland has largely left the current local film production ecosystem to the young generation, with the notable exception of the sporadic efforts made by established filmmakers who shuttle back and forth between projects on the mainland and at home. Consequently, when investigating the young filmmakers, it is difficult to discern independent ones from commercial ones, as the division between mainstream and non-mainstream filmmakers is very much blurred by the overall context of local productions being collectively marginalised in Hong Kong cinema, which makes it challenging to compare this group with the Golden Age filmmakers.

In many ways, all movies made recently bear a striking resemblance to independent films made in the 80’s and 90’s. Thanks to the subsidies from the SAR government, a majority of current local productions have obtained celebrities for their casts, as well as theatrical releases, much as independent films previously did. Additionally with their film contents relating to quotidian life, marginal people, and the lower classes, both address many similar themes and social issues.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Jevons Au Man-kit was born in 1981 and came to the fore with the screening of *Ten Years* (2015) in Hong Kong. In one of the five vignettes that constitute the film, he wrote and directed "The Dialect", which exhibited the increasing dominance of the Mandarin language over Cantonese and the struggle of ordinary people to adjust. He explained that the inspiration came from his frustration of writing film scripts in Mandarin when he was working in Hong Kong/mainland China co-productions.



Chow Kwun-Wai was born in 1979 and he is also one of the co-directors of the political film *Ten Years* (2015). The film was nominated and eventually won the Best Film on the 35th Hong Kong Film Awards, which caused the broadcast of the ceremony, as well as the screening of this film online and offline, to be banned in mainland China.

Some young directors have been involved in both the production of independent and commercial films, such as Jevons Au Man-kit (*Ten Years*, 2015 and *Trivisa*, 2016) and Chow Kwun-wai (*A Complicated Story*, 2013 and *Ten Years*, 2015). My interviewees, including an independent (Interview 16) and a commercial film director (Interview 34), have expressed similar ideas of pursuing creative freedom as their major motive for filmmaking. Additionally, the politically-charged independent film *Ten Years* (2015) turned into a sensation after its release, and it moved into the mainstream of local filmmaking, opening the door for other local productions to exhibit an increased level of political consciousness.

The difficulties of separating independent filmmakers from commercial filmmakers both before and after Hong Kong cinema's entering a period of decline, have created actual hurdles in comparing filmmakers of different generations. Here I follow Ortner's (2012) [\[open references in new window\]](#) discussion about dividing mainstream Hollywood films from independent ones. She states that there are two issues in the demarcation of the groups. First, the definitions of Hollywood film and independent film are not fixed. The fact that Hollywood films often have complicated characters and serious subject matter, combined with the existence of independent films that receive funding from major studios and have happy endings does challenge the notion of a drawing a line distinctly between them. But in terms of quantity, high-budget, entertaining, and formulaic films have always constituted the majority of Hollywood's total output. Similarly, low-budget films with serious themes and subject matters have long represented a greater percentage of the production of independent film. I argue a similar phenomenon is present in Hong Kong cinema. From this perspective, commercial filmmaking has always outnumbered independent filmmaking in terms of the number of practitioners, range of production, and influence. Lee acknowledges that, despite the sea change brought by the development of the Hong Kong and Mainland film industries, "independent film scene seems to have remained, as it were, a minority interest and a marginal presence amidst these changes" (2013:4). However, I do not mean to undercut the cultural contribution of certain independent films and particularly how they help to shape cultural identity.

The second issue, as Ortner (2012) observes, is that there is a spectrum of what can be seen as an independent film. As she claims, the spectrum has two ends, one is more "Hollywood," while the other is more avant-garde and experimental. This is precisely the case in Hong Kong cinema. For example, *The Runaway Pistol* (2002, dir. Wah-Chuen Lam), produced with the help of film celebrities, could be seen near the commercial film end, while the documentary *Rice Distribution* (dir. Tammy Cheung, 2002) might be closer to the other end. Film independence being a scalar concept, the question of where to draw a dividing line between independent and mainstream film remains open to interpretation. For the purpose of contrast, Ortner (2012) has to write as if there were a clear line between independent films and Hollywood films. And for the propose of this study, I have to escape from the mission of filtering out the independent films from the commercial ones, given all the actual difficulties we discussed above.

Instead, I see Hong Kong cinema before and after its decline in the 90s as two totalities, and each features clearly defined characteristics prevalent in most film practitioners. In the 1980s and early 1990s, most of film practitioners were working in mainstream filmmaking, thus leading to a notable focus on



The Runaway Pistol (2002) is an independent film partially funded by Andy Lau's, a megastar in Hong Kong, and reports say the director, Wah-Chuen Lam, got his break during the shooting of Lau's film *A Fighter's Blues* (2000).



Rice Distribution (2002) is a documentary records the chaos that ensued during a charity food distribution, where more than 8,000 senior citizens queued in line before dawn to receive a bag of free rice distributed by a Taoist organization in Hong Kong. The film offers a glimpse into the lives of the elderly, including their loneliness, helplessness, and selfishness.



When talkies arrived in the early 1930s, different spoken dialects in China turned out to be a problem in the making of sound films. In the mainland, where the Kuomintang or Nationalist Party was ruling, a "Mandarin-only" policy was

commercial success. After 2000, a greater degree of politicization has been exhibited among younger film practitioners, who are seen as the most politically aware generation in history, and who are driving the development of Hong Kong cinema in the absence of the established generation. From this perspective, we start the comparison of the two clusters by examining the two cinematic trends: those of the Hong Kong New Wave and the Hong Kong SAR New Wave cinemas.

Two generations of cinematic New Waves

In its 110-year history, Hong Kong cinema has had a massive influence on world film culture and the global film industry. Since the arrival of talkies in the early 1930s, Cantonese films and Mandarin films took turns dominating the Hong Kong market. As the local dialect, Cantonese was the major language used in films here before the Second World War. Nevertheless, with the influx of mainland immigrants after the war, Mandarin films gained popularity on the island city from the mid-1940s until the mid-1970s, when Cantonese films made a comeback. Bucking the domination of big studios, which produced popular Mandarin martial art films, a large number of young and creative talents came back to Hong Kong in the late 1970s after studying abroad and made ground-breaking Cantonese films that initiated what became known as the "Hong Kong New Wave." Starting around 1984, some productions gained international attention, which brought the movement into a phase seen by some as the "Second New Wave." The New Wave was spurred by the unprecedented worldwide commercial success of Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s. These filmmakers were working in a Golden Age, situated in the context of a buoyant economy in Hong Kong. After Colonial Hong Kong became the Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China) and the industry sunk into a slump around the mid-1990s, coproducing with mainland Chinese studios gradually emerged as a remedy for the ailing industry, and became a significant factor in the 2000s and 2010s. Young entrants to the filmdom have thus faced realities drastically different from those of their predecessors, and created what has become known as the "Hong Kong SAR New Wave." From a historical point of view, the generational differences of the established and the young filmmakers overlap with these two major cinematic tides.



The migration of mainland film talent to Hong Kong after the Second World War, particularly from Shanghai, brought about the popularity of Mandarin films. Due to their higher budgets and more lavish production, Mandarin films marginalized Cantonese films to second-tier status. In Mandarin production, *Huángmèidiào*, which derives from Chinese opera, is a widely welcomed musical genre; its record-breaking hit, *The Love Eterne* (1963), remains a classic of the genre.



Owing to Mandarin productions and Cantonese television, Cantonese cinema was at such a disadvantage that no Cantonese films were even made in 1972. *The House of 72 Tenants* was the only Cantonese film made in 1973; it enabled a comeback for Cantonese cinema by depicting modern Hong Kong life and average Hong Kong people. Later, the Hui Brothers' comedies further revitalized Cantonese cinema by producing down-to-earth movies for the local audience.

In *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema: 1978-2000* (2008), Professor Cheuk Pak

enforced to ban Cantonese filmmaking in China. Conversely, in the British colony of Hong Kong, Cantonese was one of the most widely spoken languages and remained popular in sound films despite government hostility. *White Gold Dragon* (1933) is the first Cantonese talkie, and it gained great success upon its release in the theatres. Unfortunately, the only copy was burned in 1935; in 1947, it was remade with the same leading actor, Sit Gok-Sin.



Wong Kar-Wai is one of the most prominent directors among the second wave. His works have had a considerable influence on filmmaking with his unique styles of nonlinear narrative, atmospheric music, and bold colours.



Stanley Kwan is one of the few directors in Asia who came out of the closet and worked on themes such as same-sex relationships and women's plight in romantic affairs. Having worked as an assistant director to Ann Hui, Kwan made his directorial debut with *Women* in 1985 and garnered great commercial and critical success. Later, his typical films *Rouge* (1987), *Centre Stage* (1992), *Hold You Tight* (1998), and *Lan Yu* (2011) brought him international repute by winning him major awards at The Hong Kong Film Awards, The Golden Horse Awards, Berlin International Film Festival, and more.

Tong gave an accurate and comprehensive introduction to this momentous cinematic tide:

“In the short span of eight years from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, the Hong Kong film industry spawned a group of young directors aged about thirty. This brand-new force consisted of about thirty people, including Ann Hui, Yim Ho, Tsui Hark, Allen Fong, Patrick Tam, Clifford Choi, Dennis Yu and others. Most of them had received film training overseas, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom; then, at various points in time, joined several local television broadcasting institutions..... After gaining practical experience in film-making for several years in the television industry, many of them left and entered the film industry.”

“The infusion of so much indigenous new blood in the field of film was unprecedented in the 80-year history of Hong Kong cinema. Passionate about film and art, these new directors gradually got a feel for current social developments. They were familiar with what the audience liked and could make films with unique ideas, interesting themes, forceful images and unusual styles. Their works were widely accepted by the mass audience and also gained recognition from the news media and critics. This group of young directors, with their irrepressible attitude, was like a huge wave passing through a Hong Kong film industry that was then at a low tide, opening up a new terrain. People thus dubbed them ‘The New Wave’ of Hong Kong cinema.” (Cheuk, 2008: 7)

In the mid-1980s, the second wave emerged when directors such as Wong Kai-wai, Clara Law, Stanley Kwan, Mabel Cheung, Alex Law and many others, took their works to the major international film festivals and garnered critical acclaim as well as an international fanbase. As Marchetti summarises, if the first wave brought the world to Hong Kong through the return of directors who attended film schools abroad and subsequently sent them “home” to China to make Hong Kong/Mainland co-productions after the restrictions were loosened in China ([*Boat People*, 1982, dir. Ann Hui; [*Homecoming*], 1984, dir. Yim Ho, etc.], then the following second wave took Hong Kong to the world via the international presence of Hong Kong directors and their works, including those made in the United States, Australia, Argentina and more ([*Illegal Immigrant*], 1985, dir. Mabel Cheung; [*A Floating Life*], 1996, dir. Clara Law; [*Happy Together*], 1997, dir. Wong Kai-wai) (Marchetti 2012). To discuss the generation who created the New Wave, reviewing the history of the 1960s and 1970s is of great value.



Mabel Cheung's films have a notable theme of migration issues, particularly depicting Hong Kongers and overseas Chinese before the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Her “Migration Trilogy,” which comprises *Illegal Immigrant*



As a renowned director couple in Hong Kong, Alex Law and Mabel Cheung oftentimes take turns to be each other's director, producer, or writer. Their long-term collaboration has produced numerous classics of Hong Kong cinema, including

(1985), *An Autumn's Tale* (1987), and *Eight Tails of Gold* (1989), marked a peak in her filming career; all these films were made in collaboration with her husband, Alex Law.

the abovementioned "Migration Trilogy" and the *Echoes of the Rainbow* (2010), which is widely considered to have brought some freshness to the gloomy local films produced under the shadow of big-budgeted Mainland/Hong Kong co-productions.



After the Second World War, refugees poured into Hong Kong, bringing with them labor resources and severe housing issues. Lacking proper governmental management, people built houses besides mountains, where no electricity, clean water, and sewerage system were available. In this type of so-called "squatter area," fire turned out to be the major threat to people's lives and properties. Moreover, in the legally built tenement houses, owners usually divided apartments into smaller sections to accommodate more people. Living conditions were generally very poor for the lower class.

Primarily born in the late 1940s to 1950s, the directors of the New Wave were born into the post-war baby boom and came of age in the 60s to 70s. The 1960s witnessed a worldwide turbulence that featured youth-led rebellions. In the British Colony of Hong Kong, the economy was growing steadily, with a GDP per capita of 400 USD that equivalent to those of Greece, Peru or South Africa (Dorn, 1998). Half of the population was under 25 years old due to the baby boom (Manion, 2004). The political situation was uneasy in this decade though, affected by anxieties about the Cultural Revolution in Mainland China and the accumulation of social grievances on the island. Several riots erupted and spurred the government to take measurements to ameliorate the prevalence of poor housing conditions, as well as improve public education and welfare.

In 1966, riots were sparked by the government's decision to increase the fare of Star Ferry, an important mode of transportation for poor people, by 25 percent. A year later, even larger riots broke out between the Communists and their sympathisers, and the colonial government. Starting as a labour dispute, the riots soon grew into massive strikes and demonstrations that challenged British colonial rule. The leftist struggle gained the support of Beijing, thus rumours that the People's Republic was going to take control of the colony began to spread. Rioters became more violent and resorted to terrorist tactics. The attempted overthrow of the colonial government was unsuccessful but planted seeds of fear of mainland China and the Communist regime among Hong Kong people. After the riots, investigations revealed that the alienation of the young generation, along with the terrible living conditions and blatant social inequality, were the underlying causes of the turmoil.

This post-war generation, as Fu (2000) outlines, "was estranged by the oppression of the dominant values and declared war against the established order," and it "claimed to fight for the subalterns (women, minorities, and laborers), striving to build a new world of equality and unfettered liberty" (Fu, 2000:71). In Hong Kong, this generational conflict became acute in the 60s. Young people, unlike their refugee parents, criticised the colonial management, demanded an increased role in its politics, and claimed the city as their home. To their elders, they were "spoiled, restless, and dangerously westernised, turning their backs on traditional codes of behaviour (especially filial piety and discipline) and thereby posing a menace to the social order" (Fu, 2000:71). This is reminiscent of what the baby boomers have to say about the current generation of young Hong Kongers. As a British colony, Hong Kong citizens were known to be characteristically law-abiding and complacent (Lee, 2013). Accusing their baby boomer children of being "dangerously westernised," the elder generation was dismayed with their children's defiance of the colonial government, which was considered a "western" behaviour. The economy soared in Hong Kong during the 1970s, yet social issues such as income inequality, inflation, and low quality of life standards worsened during this boom. Young filmmakers at that era absorbed



The 1966 riots lasted for three nights, and were fuelled by anger about the colonial government's decision to increase the Star Ferry fare by 25%. They led to one death, dozens of injuries, and over 1,800 arrests. It is also the first large-scale social movement in Hong Kong in which the majority of participants were young people.



According to Szeto and Chen (2012), Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong* (1997) prefigured the "Hong Kong SAR New Wave." It was the first indie film directed by Chan and was sponsored by the Hong Kong megastar Andy Lau on a shoe-string budget of HKD500,000 and a production team of five people. Set in subsidized housing projects, Chan considers the film an illustration of the lifestyle of many young Hong Kongers of the time and a typical "Hong Kong thing" due to the region's notorious housing problems.

inspirations from the underbelly of society, social and political activism, and public conversations about local identity, creating the ground-breaking New Wave cinema movement and leading to the golden decades of Hong Kong cinema (Fu, 2000; Bordwell, 2011; Law, 2001). They, and the current young generations, bear a striking resemblance to each other. They are both disobedient, self-expressive, and concerned with the socially disadvantaged.

The 'Hong Kong SAR New Wave', as its name suggests, indicates a certain level of continuity with the baby boomer New Wave in the 1970s. Szeto & Chen (2012) have first used this term in scholarly discussion in 2012 to refer to a generation of Hong Kong directors who are:

"either (1) new directors coming of age and garnering serious local critical attention after Hong Kong becomes a Special Administrative Region of China (HKSAR); or (2) directors who have joined the industry earlier and may have substantial experience, but have only gained serious local critical attention and/or acclaim after 1997; but most importantly, (3) they are directors who are consciously and critically aware of themselves as working from a local condition very different from the pre-1997 Hong Kong, who takes on local issues with much greater Sinophone intra-local and inter-local awareness, and whose world-view depart from the chauvinist and xenophobic petitgrandiose Hong Kongism typical of pre-1997 Hong Kong colonial inferiority complex" (Szeto, 2006) (Szeto & Chen, 2012:122).


As Chu (2015) observes, the two generations of New Wave directors were both able to "present the unrepresentable." The baby boomer New Wave filmmakers experimented with new genres and methods of shooting film, distinguishing themselves from the traditional film masters such as Li Hanxiang and Chang Che; while SAR New Wave directors have been attempting to present contents that cannot be presented in the current co-production model. In a nutshell, Chu called the common ground as "refusing the consolation of correct forms" (Chu, 2015:114).



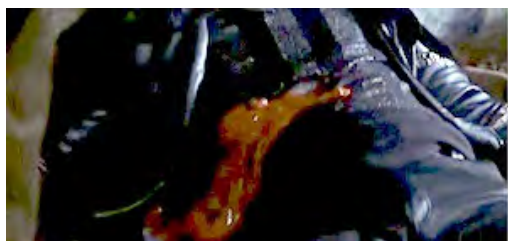
Young director Adam Wong Sau Ping garnered public attention with his feature film *The Way We Dance* in 2013. After the screening, its tagline "How far are you willing to go for your dream?" went viral



Philip Yung Tsz-Kwong was inspired by a true story to make his feature film *Port of Call* (2015). In the film, the protagonist Wang Jiamei is a 16-year-old immigrant from mainland China who is driven by

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| <p>among young people in Hong Kong. They replace “your dream” with anything they are pursuing in life, even “protecting Hong Kong” during the protests in 2019.</p> | <p>loneliness and material desires to do “compensated dating”, something very akin to being an escort, in Hong Kong. When she meets a lonely young man named Ting Sze Cong, with whom she has chatted online for a long time, she requests him to kill her during sex to end her pain, which he does, later dismembering her body to hide the evidence.</p> |
|  |  |
| <p><i>Somewhere Beyond the Mist</i> (2017) is another film that is adopted from a true story. The teenage protagonist Connie grows up in a dysfunctional family, with a mother who endures domestic violence and blindly worships male power, and a father who is violent and rude. Living in desperate circumstances, she and her boyfriend design a plan to kill her parents and eventually execute it.</p> | <p>Among films made by young directors, many feature protagonists as patients of physical or mental illnesses. <i>Tomorrow is Another Day</i> (2018) depicts a tough mother who musters the courage to carry on in life and take care of her autistic son after she leaves her husband who she finds cheating on her.</p> |

However, the two cinematic waves are essentially different due to market circumstances. When the baby boomer New Wave generation had just graduated from films schools overseas, various television stations in Hong Kong were actively seeking professionals. The scant supply of talents and the huge demand for content left them enormous room for creativity. The film industry during the 1970s was in a process of rapid market expansion. What the current young SAR New Wave filmmakers are currently facing, however, is sharp shrinkage of both the domestic and overseas markets, and a tough employment environment. The signature genre of Hong Kong cinema, gangster films, “has been facing a deadlock,” As Chu points out (2015: 116), co-producing with mainland Chinese companies would make such blockbusters possible, but their politically controversial themes and bloody scenes have turned producers to other ideologically safe and market-proven genres for release on the mainland.



Shinjuku Incident (2009) is an example of Hong Kong gangster films in “deadlock.” The film was directed by Derek Yee Tung Sing and starred Jackie Chan—the Kung Fu superstar from China. After its release in Hong Kong, it was nominated for 4 awards at the 29th Hong Kong Film Awards. Nevertheless, it remains banned by the Chinese authorities due to its portrayal of Chinese gangsters in Japan, which is considered a sensitive topic, and its carnography.

Meanwhile, local production, unable to fund big-budget films, has turned to ones with subaltern and (semi-)art-house themes, which further alienate mainstream audiences.

Optimistic about the SAR New Wave, Szeto and Chen (2012) gave a rave review of the young generation, asserting that their

“films are not loud and cocky like films made by the previous generation. They are low-key, grounded, inclusive, collaborative, open, but also very determined, principled and persistent, even in adversity. They look cool, but they mean hot” (Szeto & Chen, 2012:131).

Asked whether the SAR New Wave could eventually revive Hong Kong cinema, as their baby boomer New Wave predecessors did in the 1970s, David, a renowned film producer expressed dismay, saying:

“What does the word “industry” mean anyway? It means a variety of products, a standardized industrial process, and consumers that the manufacturers should study. Producing one single genre of films could not bring prosperity to the whole industry. During the peak time, we had gangsters, comedies, horror films, period films, erotic films, and so on and so forth. Now there is one: pathetic art films. Obviously, it is not an industry anymore.” — Interview 43 (David, film producer/scriptwriter)

Szeto and Chen (2012) have used a broad brush-stroke to paint the picture of Hong Kong SAR New Wave, considering works from filmmakers of any age, so long as they came to the fore after 1997 and are aware that their industrial conditions are considerably different than they were during colonial Hong Kong epoch. I, on the other hand, primarily focus on young people who were born between the 1970s and early 1990s, and who rose to prominence after the year 2000. These emerging young filmmakers are as markedly different from their predecessors, including both the baby boomer New Wave directors and other previous established film practitioners, in terms of filmmaking ideas and practices. In the next few sections, the divergences will be examined one at a time and reasons for them will be analysed as well.

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JUMP CUT

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Market-driven versus self-expressive



Red Sorghum (1987) is the first feature film of Zhang Yimou, a leading figure in the fifth generation of filmmakers in China. The film won numerous awards globally, including the Golden Bear Award at Berlin Film Festival.



Farewell My Concubine (1993) was directed by another quintessential director in the fifth generation, Chen Kaige. It won the highest prize at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film and Best Cinematography at the Academy Awards.



A City of Sadness (1989) was the first Taiwanese film to win the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival. The director Hou Hsiao-Hsien is a leading figure in Taiwan's New Wave cinema movement and he is known for his extremely

Hong Kong film practitioners active in the 1970s to 1990s value the significance of the market and audiences in their strategies of film production. In the interviews, 14 established filmmakers all stressed the necessity and value of considering the market and audience preference. As Lawrence, the director of production in a renowned film company, succinctly puts it, “a film that failed to sell well is a death sentence (for that filmmaker)” (Interview 7). Filmmaking is show business, and therefore an industry that consists of manufacturers, production processes, and consumers of movies. David, another interviewee, explains his philosophy as follows:

“We make films for audiences. I love art films personally, when I was doing my master’s degree in the United States, my thesis was about Bernardo Bertolucci. However, making a popular commercial film is much harder than making an art film, simply because you may have 50 people who enjoy the art film very much, but you have to make 1.5 billion people like your commercial film, which one is more difficult? So the rule is rather simple: always analyse your audience before making the film. Figure out who is your target audience and do your research well. The market is constantly changing for sure, so you need to keep studying it.” — Interview 43 (David, film producer/scriptwriter)

Looking over the borders, film production in mainland China in the 1980s and 1990s involved the birth of the fifth generation of filmmakers, who then greatly changed the face of filmmaking in China. In Taiwan, the so-called “Taiwan New Cinema” movement was also underway, largely due to the competition from Hong Kong films and the rise in popularity of home video rental. Both movements were keen on portraying realistic stories of life during or soon after the so-called “bitter years” of the Sino-Japanese and Chinese Civil Wars, and on offering a sympathetic perspective on the suffering of the populace. When compared to their mainland or Taiwanese counterparts in that era, Hong Kong filmmakers exhibited a much clearer commercial sensibility.

“In the late 80s and early 90s, mainland directors tended to speak about their cultural missions a lot in the seminars, as did the Taiwanese. We did not talk about it because it is pointless. The most critical thing is: does your film have audiences? If the answer is no, whatever cultural mission you are carrying, it does not make any sense. Every director has his or her original intention of making the film, we [Hong Kong directors] have passed that stage and entered to the next: how to make the audience to accept your work. Without audiences, everything is just pointless.” — Interview 9 (Sing, director/scriptwriter/producer)

The established generation of Hong Kong producers has long been accused of catering to the mainland audience and abandoning the local market in favour of co-productions with mainland China. For them, it simply means applying the principle of putting the audience first. When the target audience shifted

long takes with that feature an intricate choreography of actors and space.



A Brighter Summer Day (1989) directed by Edward Yang is hailed as the defining work of the New Taiwanese Cinema. The film is based on a true story of the murder of a teenage girl by her boyfriend during the intense political environment created by the retreat of the Kuomintang (KMT) army to Taiwan following their defeat by the Communist Party in 1949, and the conflicts this generated with local Taiwanese families.



Winners and Sinners (1983) is an action comedy film written, directed, and starring Sammo Hung. Together with the *My Lucky Stars* (1985), and *Twinkle, Twinkle Lucky Stars* (1985), the three films form what is called the *Lucky Stars* franchise, which has been a great commercial success in Hong Kong.



Security Unlimited (1981) is a comedy directed by and starring Michael Hui, considered by many

from local Hong Kongers, Taiwanese, Southeast Asians and the Chinese diaspora to millions of mainlanders, audience analysis turned to the question of what these mainlanders would prefer. Renowned director Clifton Ko Chi-Sum, talking about Hong Kong comedies in the 80s, said that they primarily used physical action instead of conversation to deliver the humour, as they were told by producers that audiences in Taiwan and Southeast Asia found it difficult to comprehend dialogue which contains puns and double entendres, but that a 300-pound-fattie tripping over a banana peel would make everyone laugh (Da & Su, 2018). [\[open references in new window\]](#) The consideration of differing audience tastes in different markets shaped Hong Kong comedies of the 80s: they leaned heavily on physical comedy and fast cutting montage to appeal to diverse audiences.

This style appears in the most popular comedies in that era:

- The "*Five Lucky Stars*" Franchise [including the *Winners and Sinners* (1983); *My Lucky Stars* (1985); *Twinkle, Twinkle Lucky Stars* (1985)] featuring Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan;
- *Security Unlimited* (1981) with Michael Hui;
- the *Aces Go Places* Franchise (1982-1984) starring Samuel Hui and Mak Ka;
- the *Happy Ghost* Franchise (1984-1991) featuring Raymond Wong;
- and Wong Jing-directed *The Romancing Stars* (1987).

These comedies were warmly received in Asia – some were even well-received in Anglophone markets – mostly due to their funny action scenes. In the early 1990s, Stephen Chow came to the fore with his unique style of non sequitur-based comedy, called “nonsense” (which in Cantonese is “Mo lei tau”). His works featured heavy use of Cantonese puns and exaggerated performances with imaginative plots to create a uniquely non-logical type of humour. The language barriers, as one can imagine, created real difficulties for non-Chinese speakers in understanding his wordplay-rich humour, which is likely one of the primary reasons why the likes of Jackie Chan and Jet Li are more well-known among non-Chinese moviegoers.

Another factor that contributed to the commercial orientation of that generation was the responsibility they had to their investors. As the respondents emphasized, a sustainable relation is impossible to build if you consistently lose your investor’s money. To them, directors who neglect the actual for-profit impetus of venture capitalists and care only about their own freedom of self-expression, are rather selfish.

In stark contrast to this profit-driven philosophy of filmmaking, the SAR New Wave generation values self-expression as a guiding ideology. These directors’ practices have two shared features: their demand for total freedom of expression and their desire to focus attention on various Hong Kong social issues.

Many, if not all, of the young film practitioners and students whom I interviewed have taken self-expression as their major driving force to study film and pursue careers in the field. Any restrictions imposed on their creative freedom, including the possible compromises one has to make to reach wider audiences in commercial and mainstream films, or the censorship system in mainland China one has to grapple with in co-production, have been met with strong resistance. ‘I make films however I want’ is a common creed of the young filmmakers, and a great majority of them have associated filmmaking with a responsibility to arouse social concern for the poor, the sick, and the downtrodden. As Ken, a young independent film maker explains:

“You have to awaken the awareness of Hong Kong people to be

critics to be one of the foremost comedians in the Hong Kong film industry. He and his two brothers - Samuel Hui and Ricky Hui – form the Hui Brothers, who have appeared in several comedies and gained great popularity, especially among the working classes in the 1970s and early 1980s.



Aces Go Places (1982) (a.k.a. *Mad Mission* in the United States), starring Samuel Hui and Mak Ka, is the first installment of the *Aces Go Places* series. In the film, Samuel Hui plays a suave, international art thief who tries to redeem himself by collaborating with bumbling police detective Mak Ka to track down stolen diamonds. Its Chinese title literally means “the best partners” to refer to the hilarious effect the combination of the two comedians brings.



Happy Ghost (1984) is a hilarious story about a scholar named Pik (played by Raymond Wong), who lived in the Qing dynasty in the 1850s, committed suicide after a series of troubles in life, and was being accidentally brought back as a ghost to contemporary Hong Kong by three school girls. Being scared from the beginning, the girls not only make friends with the ghost, but eventually learn a more positive and hardworking attitude towards life through his encouragement. *Happy Ghost* franchise successfully combined the two genres of horror and comedy, and garnered massive box office revenue.

concerned with their own identities and their surroundings. These are not something a good box office return can achieve. Bringing up the awareness and discussion towards issues is the kind of success I want to have. After my last indie feature film, I had several projects in process but all failed in the end because I cared too much about their commerciality and eventually lost my passion. If making films are for earning money, I would rather take the job offer for a 15 second TV commercial!” — Interview 16 (Ken, young director)

“The Hong Kong market needs something different other than those action movies or comedies made by the older filmmakers, and box office is not the only measurement to determine what is a good movie and what is not.... I hope my work could attract audience but I do not put “what the audience needs” as a priority. To cause them to ruminate over some issues is my aim, and I get fulfilment from it.” — Interview 34 (Ben, young director)

Working in co-production projects has created difficulties for young practitioners due to the mainland censorship system, and become the least favourite option for film students. The restrictions mainland Chinese authorities put on the subject matter, plot, and dialogue hamper writers. Even if they are aware of the requirements, they find the regulations to be ambiguous and flexible, which makes it difficult for them to figure out what exactly is forbidden from appearing in films. Furthermore, their unfamiliarity with mainland lives has prevented many Hong Kong scriptwriters from creating stories that mainlanders can relate to. Au Man Kit Jevons, one of the directors of *Ten Years* (2015) has repeatedly expressed his frustration about working with Johnnie To’s company and dealing with co-productions. For example, the love story he wrote could not pass Beijing’s censorship “because I made fun of historical figures and was told it is subversive” (Zeng, 2016), but also the dialogue he created for mainland characters was not seen as authentic and convincing. Speaking of his experience of working in co-production projects, he concludes, “I just could not realize my value there” (He, 2018).

As a consequence, young filmmakers with similar worldviews have turned to making locally-oriented films. The telling of Hong Kong stories that young directors are more familiar with, along with other factors to be examined in the next section, have endowed contemporary Hong Kong cinema with a strong sense of localism that distinguishes it sharply from the transnationality that defined Hong Kong films of the Golden Age.

Transnationality versus localism

David Bordwell famously gave rave reviews to Hong Kong cinema at its peak, claiming it “is the regional cinema par excellence” (2000:61). The interviewees who made this excellence possible, without exception, assert the transnationality of Hong Kong cinema.

Its transnationality comes in every way: the industry was nurtured by immigrant energies, including that first generation of film talents who migrated from Shanghai, and members of baby boomer New Wave born or raised in Vietnam (Tsui Hark), Thailand (Peter Ho-sun Chan), South Africa (Lawrence Ah Mon), as well as many others who were educated in film schools in the United States or Europe.

During the production stage, Hong Kong film studios were known for shaping products to the tastes of different regions by sending preproduction synopses



The Romancing Star (1987) is a comedy directed by Wong Jing and starring Chow Yun-fat. The film portrays a boy, who is a poor car mechanic, trying to woo a rich girl by pretending to be a rich man. Unbeknownst to him, the girl has disguised herself as the daughter of a rich family as well. This franchise initiated a subgenre of comedy in Hong Kong known as the “girl-chasing comedy.”

to regional distributors and making adjustments according to their feedback. Filmmakers were actively looking for co-production opportunities as well. Investments came in from everywhere, Taiwan particularly, and numerous films were shot in foreign backlots. Eventually, the products were released to meet worldwide audiences, not only the important Asian and Anglophone ones, but also to markets that tended to be overlooked by many, such as Africa and the Middle East. Additionally, the directors and their films participated in international film festivals. Both of these facts further contributed to the global popularity of Hong Kong cinema (Teo, 2004; Pang, 2010; Bordwell, 2011).

The export of these movies to the world also fuelled the rise of “Cantopop” (Cantonese pop music) in mainland China, as well as Southeast and East Asian nations in the 1980s and 1990s. Serving as the theme songs in Hong Kong movies, Cantopop constantly topped the charts in these countries before being eclipsed by Mandapop (Mandarin pop music) in Mainland China and Taiwan and K-pop (South Korean pop music) in the Koreas. The music and the film industries were in a harmonious and reciprocal relationship; it was not uncommon to see singers in movies regardless of their acting abilities (e.g. Jacky Cheung Hok-yau, Leslie Cheung Kwok Wing) or actors releasing music albums despite their dubious possession of singing talent (e.g. Chow Yun Fat, Tony Leung Chiu Wai). The transnationality of Cantopop extends beyond its multinational fanbase to its propensity to absorb western music styles, even adapting foreign tunes and rewriting the lyrics into Cantonese, though this led to frequent criticisms of its lack of originality.

In film circles, the established film practitioners who were contributing to and nourished by the thriving industry are seen to be especially open-minded. ‘Get out of Hong Kong and see the world’ is common advice they give to young successors.

“Wherever there is a job, you should go and take it. Because you do not know what these life experiences and people you get acquaintance of could bring to you in the future.” — Interview 18 (Francis, director/cinematographer)

“We welcome competitors, they make us grow stronger. So I cannot identify with the current ‘localism’ trend among young people. Being local is to confine yourself in this limited space, and it brings no good.” — Interview 9 (Sing, director/ scriptwriter/ producer)

The ideological and regional differences between filmmakers from Hong Kong and elsewhere did not impede Hong Kong cinema in becoming ‘borderless’ long before the era of globalization, when successful multi-local and trans-local business operations were conducted as common practice (Yau, 2001; Zhang, 2003).

Sing’s apprehension above (Interview 9) stems from contrasting his approach to one common among younger filmmakers: resisting transnationality. They emphasize local investment, local stories, local spirits, and local audiences’ concerns. One generational fault line comes in identifying what defines a “Hong Kong movie.” The established generation, such as Peter Ho-sun Chan or Ann Hui, tend to believe that as long as the film is made by a Hong Konger, it should be counted as a Hong Kong movie (Szeto & Chen, 2013; Dai, 2016). Jackie Chan, during the 13th Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in March 2018, made the hotly debated claim that “there is one



Jenny Suen is a young screenwriter, director, and producer in Hong Kong. Her directorial debut, *The White Girl* (2017), tells a love story set in the last fishing village of Hong Kong. In an interview she explains, "I was born in Hong Kong and lived overseas for 8 years. When I came back home and look through windows from my bedroom, I realised the fishing village in front of me has drastically changed. Fishermen are gone. Boats are empty and drifting on the water aimlessly and gradually disappearing. 250 years ago, Hong Kong was once a fishing village. Look what has been happening here for the past few years. It seems to indicate that the city of Hong Kong is facing the same destiny as the boats" (Lomography, 2017).

single category — that is Chinese Cinema [instead of the division of Mainland cinema and Hong Kong cinema]" (Chen, 2018).

The younger generation, on the contrary, considers two factors as indispensable to authentic Hong Kong movies. First of all the film should have a non-negotiable association with the locality named "Hong Kong." Only stories that happen on this soil therefore deserve to be called Hong Kong films. Second, the majority of the cast and production crew have to be Hong Kongers as well. One of the major indications of a talent crisis in the Hong Kong film industry can be observed from the list of awardees of Hong Kong Film Awards each year. Mainland actors and actresses are dominating both the silver screen and the prize lists. Jenny Suen, a young director explicitly says that "if the major roles are not played by Hong Kongers, it will be meaningless to make any more Hong Kong films" [as cited in Luo (2017)]. This opinion reflects the views of many of Hong Kong's nascent filmmakers.

The trend of localism exhibited among young filmmakers' works can be seen in two recent production trends. First, young people have had difficulties working on co-production projects due to their unfamiliarity with mainland culture, as discussed previously. Second, and more positively, they often have a strong wish to protect and preserve the Hong Kong film industry and the local culture it represents.

In the co-production era, established film practitioners have collectively flocked to Beijing or Shanghai seeking greater financial resources. Their philosophy of consistently catering to the tastes of the target audience has increasingly made co-productions less palatable to Hong Kong moviegoers. These audiences, the SAR New Wave filmmakers believe, are being abandoned by experienced and renowned filmmakers, because "mainland money is much easier to earn" (Interview 34, Ben, director). Young filmmakers generally believe that without continuous film production the local industry which serves the Hong Kong audience will eventually disappear, and along with the languishing of Hong Kong cinema will come the destruction and disappearance of Hong Kong local culture.

Prior to the global outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, which halted film production on the island city, the quantity of local productions per year, taking from 2012 to 2018 as an example, fluctuated between 14 and 29 films. In contrast, the number of co-productions was between 16 and 41. For the former, in genres covering romance, comedies, horror, kung fu films and others, box office revenue in Hong Kong each year accounted for merely 1.73% to 7.91% of total movie ticket sales. Overseas box office for Hong Kong local productions is almost negligible. For one thing, not all local productions have had the opportunity to access world audiences. Looking at the data from 2018, 27 local productions were screened in Hong Kong with a total box office revenue of 58,926,444 HK dollars (approximately 7,600,000 US dollars) which amounts to 3.1% of the overall yearly ticket sales. Of the 27 films, the 3 that were released in mainland China, *L Storm*, *The Lingering* and *Love Only*, earned only 442,988 RMB (roughly 62,380 USD), 2,125 RMB (around 299 USD) and 1,559 RMB (around 219 USD) respectively. In Taiwan, 4 Hong Kong local productions were released in theatres with a box office revenue of 714,511 TWD (around 23,899 USD). 5 local films were able to reach audiences in Singapore and 2 were seen in Malaysia, where they created revenue of 308,817 SGD (around 218,267 USD) and 2,409,983 RM (554,770 USD), respectively. Outside the aforementioned areas only 2018's *L Storm* successfully obtained theatrical release in Australia, where it generated sales of 54,644 AUD (35,865 USD) and in New Zealand, with a revenue of 7,935 USD.



L Storm (2018) was produced by Pegasus Entertainment, established by Raymond Wong and his son Edmond Wong. The film has a typical Hong Kong crime film storyline that follows investigators from the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) and the Joint Financial Intelligence Unit (JFIU) digging into an unsolved corruption and money laundering case, and eventually bringing the criminals to justice.



All's Well, Ends Well (1992) is one of the best films among those made within just a couple of weeks. The film was produced by and stars Raymond Wong, directed by Clifton Ko Chi-Sum, and gathered several megastars in Hong Kong including Stephen Chow, Leslie Cheung and Maggie Cheung. Shot in just 13 working days, the film production was announced in early January and released to cinemas at the end of that very month.



A Chinese Ghost Story (1987) is a classic Hong Kong ghost film. It starred Leslie Cheung and Joey Wong, and was produced by Tsui Hark, is loosely based on an ancient Chinese ghost novel. After its theatrical release, it garnered great popularity both inside and outside of Hong

Those films that stood out from other local productions and were able to be released in international markets saw their worldwide ticket sales dwarfed by those of China/Hong Kong co-productions. As apparently the most popular Hong Kong local production in that year, *L Storm* acquired in total just 2.9 million USD box office revenue, including in mainland China. For the sake of contrast, the 17 co-productions earned 9.791 billion RMB (around 1.378 billion USD) in the mainland Chinese film market only, which means that, on average, each film made 81 million USD, nearly 28 times the total worldwide revenue of the most profitable Hong Kong local production in 2018. There are limitation to drawing a comparison in this fashion, since the earning power of each film varies widely, but the aim is to exhibit how tremendous the gap is between the potential return on investment for local productions and co-productions for a producer looking at sales figures (see the series of reports *A Collection of Information about Hong Kong Film Industry 2012 – 2018* released by the Hong Kong Film Development Council).

The weakening appetite for Hong Kong movies among Asian audiences, particularly in the Southeast Asia and Taiwan, once the most profitable overseas markets for the Hong Kong film industry, is due to a battery of complex reasons. Internally, film productions in the 1990s suffered from a decrease in quality due to the prevalent mentality of lighting-fast production, often churning out a film in few days. To reduce cost, producers tended to rush out copy-cat products whenever a certain type of film became popular. A large quantity of similar films was mass-produced rapidly, which also proved to be a solution for the skyrocketing remunerations of celebrities – the less time they stayed on the shooting locations, the lower the production cost was. The 1990s has also witnessed rampant piracy in Asia. Before a movie could be sold to overseas markets, it was available as pirated VCDs in markets. This crippled ticket sales in theatres in Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and other places, not to mention the local Hong Kong market. Noam, a veteran producer who joined the industry in the mid-1970s, recounts that:

“I initiated a project at that time which was a ghost film. My contacts in Malaysia and Singapore were very interested in it and they decided to invest 1 million Hong Kong dollars each, and we soon settled the contracts. After I faxed the Malaysian producer the synopsis and the crew list, he paid me 30,000 as a down payment and the second instalment of 300,000 was transferred before we finished the production after a month. Once it was completed, he told me that he was not going to pay for the rest since the movie was available in the VCD market in Kuala Lumpur. I was shocked because the final cut was not even released in Hong Kong, how did it get to Malaysia? My team and myself spent 7 years trying to find out who the mole was, and of course I cannot tell you who. My point is that, with piracy becoming increasingly widespread, the return on investment of film production in Hong Kong has deteriorated to the extent that small and medium-sized companies have closed down and only big studios are able to continue making films, but at lower costs, which in turn has caused the worsening of film quality.” — Interview 21 (Noam, director/producer)

Kong, particularly among East Asian and Southeast Asian countries. Its huge success sparked a trend of folklore ghost films in the Hong Kong film industry.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



When Hong Kong filmmakers first encountered the rejection of Chinese authorities on the endings of their films being “criminals escaped from justice,” they recycled the old trick used when coping with the authorities in Malaysia: They made another ending, with criminals being caught by the police after being shot, and the revised version was sent for censorship. *Infernal Affairs* (2020) is a case in point. In its Hong Kong version, Lau Kin-ming (Andy Lau) kills the real cop Chan Wing-yan (Tony Leung) in the elevator, and when the elevator door opens, Lau shows his police ID card to his “colleagues” and, therefore, escapes capture. In the mainland version, when the door opens, his “colleagues” say, “We now know you are the mole in the police. You are arrested.” Soon, Chinese authorities reacted to it and tightened the policy to discontinue double endings.



Stephen Chow's *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two-Cinderella* (1995) encountered both critical and commercial failures upon its release in Hong Kong. Whereas in mainland China, the pirated VCDs were circulated widely among cinephiles, particularly among college students in the 1990s, and even created a subculture phenomenon. When Stephen Chow started to make co-productions and have them released officially in mainland China, those who enjoyed his previous films illegally have explained that they felt they had to go to the theatre because they owe Stephen Chow movie tickets.

Compounding the issues around film quality, audiences in Southeast Asia and Taiwan were diverted to other means of entertainment such as Hollywood blockbusters, South Korean films, television series, and streaming media content. In other words, people in these areas were simply less interested in Hong Kong stories. David explains the phenomenon in this way:

“There were a large quantity of Hong Kong and Guangdong immigrants in Southeast Asia and these people formed a major part of the fanbase of overseas Hong Kong movie ticket sales. The nostalgia they felt towards their hometown drove them into cinemas to watch Cantonese language Hong Kong films. However, their offspring who were born and raised locally may not have the same strong attachment and therefore the demand [for Hong Kong films] dropped.” — Interview 43 (David, film producer/scriptwriter)

Compared to the shrinking Southeast Asian and Taiwanese markets, the vast mainland film market seems particularly tempting. For a long period of time, Hong Kong films were circulated widely on the mainland thanks (ironically) to piracy, as the public screening of foreign films, including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan, was under strict control. The huge fanbase created by this clandestine circulation was the cornerstone for the popularity of Hong Kong directors and celebrities after they were allowed to enter mainland due to a change in Chinese cultural policies. Since they found such projects financially very lucrative, more Hong Kong filmmakers went north to generate films that aimed at passing the rigid Chinese censorship system, pleasing mainland audiences, and convincing them to pay for tickets. This in turn made their productions less attractive for audiences outside mainland China. For example, stories relating to hauntings by ghosts, homosexual love, or criminals who have escaped from justice have higher chance of being rejected by the Chinese authorities, and therefore Hong Kong filmmakers now have learned lessons from previous rejections and avoid making them. Yet, ghost and horror films were once one of the most popular genres in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Southeast Asia.

For the young generation, figuring out how to deal with the rising Chinese clout is a different story. Assuming a defensive posture, many of the Hong Kong's young people have been showing waves of anger and resentment towards the possibility of a Chinese takeover. Keeping the city's independence and uniqueness has become their common cause. Film for them has become a weapon to raise social consciousness and encourage civil engagement. In the recent two decades, three types of local films have resonated with young filmmakers and Hong Kong audiences. The first is films concerning chronic social maladies, such as unreasonable housing prices, limited living space, the lack of upward mobility for young people, the issues of an aging population, and the burden on social services due to the influx of immigrants. The second type either explicitly or metaphorically points to the political strife between Hong Kong and mainland China. The two types of films have lent a sense of darkness and hopelessness to the SAR New Wave cinema. The last type of plotline is essentially motivational. Works such as *Gallants* (2010), *The Way We Dance* (2013), *Weeds on Fire* (2016), and *Men on The Dragon* (2018) all describe how a frustrated Hong Kong man overcomes external difficulties,

often a power from mainland China, and eventually resolves his problems while regaining his dignity. The single-hero story is not a Hong Kong invention in scriptwriting, but the formula is well-received in present society where young people are eager to see a return to the status that their homeland enjoyed in the 1980s, and the young filmmakers hope to convey these inspirational messages to their peers.



Gallants (2010) is an action-comedy directed by two young directors Derek Kwok and Clement Cheng. The film is filled with nostalgia for Hong Kong's Golden Age of action movies by presenting a style similar to that of the action/ comedy films of the 1960s and 1970s, even starring Leung Siu-lung, Chen Kuan-tai and Teddy Robin, who were the most famous Kung Fu stars of that era. *Gallants* won the Best Film on the 30th Hong Kong Film Awards in 2011.



The Way We Dance (2013) caused a sensation in Hong Kong among young people upon its release. The film depicts a college girl who is a lover of street dance, and strives to pursue her dream to create her own style dancing inspired by Tai Chi. The release of this film was seen as a breath of fresh air to the local film industry, as its theme of dancing had rarely been touched upon in Hong Kong cinema, as well as due to its casting of several rookie actors and actresses.



Weeds on Fire (2016), the directorial debut of Steve Chan Chi-Fat, is based on the true story of Hong Kong's first baseball team, the Shatin Martins, from its establishment to their winning of the league's championship. Sport movies, particularly ones about baseball, are a rarity in the local film industry, but it was nominated for Best Film, and Chan was nominated for Best New Director, in the 36th Hong Kong Film Awards. Made on a shoestring budget, the production of this film relied heavily on the underpaid or non-paid work of Chan's schoolmates in the Academy of Film at Hong Kong Baptist University, which caused considerable controversy in the industry.



Men on the Dragon (2018) portrays a story of three middle-aged employees working in a telecommunications company in Hong Kong. They are forced to get trained and attend a dragon boat race on behalf of their company to ingratiate themselves with the management and avoid getting fired. During their training by a young and passionate coach, they gradually learn to face difficulties in life and fight to regain their dignity. The film marks the directorial debut of Chan Wing San, who graduated from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts in 2000 and since then has been working as a scriptwriter on multiple local productions and Mainland/Hong Kong co-productions.

The young filmmakers' turn to localism also steers their attention to the overseas market. They believe the uniqueness of Hong Kong local culture can be best represented by local directors, as opposed to Western directors who just want to cram tourist attractions into their blockbusters.

“Why do we have to give up the rest of the world just for the mainland Chinese market? This world needs films that are made from your heart, instead of catering to a certain ridiculous system of censorship..... We don't care about the mainland market, and



Transformers: Age of Extinction (2014) has some shots taken in Quarry Bay, Hong Kong, where more than 10,000 residents live packed into five massive buildings that form the shape of an E, whose mass and cramped conditions create a sense of oppression which is considered typical of Hong Kong.



Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild* (1990) is set in 1960s Hong Kong. It is a story about Yuddy (Leslie Cheung), a playboy who is well known for stealing girls' hearts and breaking them but who suffers from his conflicted feelings towards his adoptive mother and her biological mother who abandoned him and refuses to meet him when Yuddy finds her in the Philippines. The film is loaded with nostalgia through props, music, and costumes; as the film critic Li Cheuk To says, "Reminiscence is but a lament that the good of the present will not last. And *Days of Being Wild* is but an elegy for a Hong Kong caught between 1989 and 1997" (Li, 2015).



The "A Can" character first appeared in the TV drama *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1979). The function of A Can is to depict mainland immigrants as country bumpkins, and draw a contrast to the more modern Hong Kong characters.

we shoot what we want in Hong Kong. Even more, there exists the chance that, like what Hong Kong cinema did in the past, it could win back the world market. We may lose the mainland market, but we may win back the world (Tang, 2016)." — Kwun-wai Chow (young director)

Au Man Kit Jevons, who cooperated with Kwun-wai Chow and three other young men to direct *Ten Years* (2015) claimed on one occasion that he could survive in the industry even without the mainland market (CR2, 2017). [[open references in new page](#)] Could this attitude represent a rising transnationality within the new generation? As the young directors claim that they are most concerned with local Hong Kong stories, the tastes of Hong Kong audience, and so-called Hong Kong values, including freedom, human rights, and the rule of law, while the majority of the established filmmakers are absent from the current local film industry. Emphasizing their identities as Hong Kongers, young people tend to situate themselves in opposition to the category of mainlander.

Nevertheless, this local consciousness is not an invention of the 2010s. Hong Kong's local consciousness is considered to have reached maturity in the 1970s, when the island city was increasingly isolated from the mainland, both culturally and politically. Baby boomers were entering economic and political life while their refugee parents were gradually withdrawing from it (Chan, 2000 & Teo, 1997). Mirroring this heightened local consciousness, the term "indigenous cinema" was developed in the mid-70s to refer to Hong Kong film as a geopolitically defined cinema. The term, as Chu (2003) points out, downplays the significance of ethnic Chinese identity and differentiates it from "Chinese cinema" or "overseas Chinese cinema." Film critics in Hong Kong then developed two approaches to their indigenous cinema: one that emphasized the function of cinema in the community, and another that argued the indigenesness to be "a consequence of the absorption and modification of elements from the Chinese artistic tradition and other national film products" (Chu, 2003: xix-xx).

After the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, Hong Kong nostalgia cinema emerged to offer an escape from the unpleasant present and the uncertain future, and reflected a yearning for an idealized colonial past. As Kathryn Woodard explained,

"The recovery of the past is part of the process of constructing identity. To rewrite or reinvent the history of the past in cinematic form, in this respect, is to reconstruct the collective identities and memories of the society. It is way to search for the lost origin and the time past in cinematic narratives." (as cited in Chan, 2000:265)

As Bordwell believes, the impetus for the development of a local consciousness in the 80s was the fact that "A Can" movies came into play. The image of a mainlander "A Can" being "stupid, slow on the uptake, backward, poor, shallow, and a country hick" mirrors the portray of a "Hong Kong person as clever, savvy, progressive, rich and modern." The contrast thus "allowed Hong Kong people to assert their own identity and to be self-satisfied" (1998:6).

Since the slump of the film industry in the mid-90s, filmmakers have no longer been required to make pan-Asian products and that shift in turn has infused stronger local flavours into their films. *The Young and Dangerous franchise* (1995-2000), *Hu-du-men* (1996), and *Lifeline* (1997), among others, have probed the niches of local life and obtained rich rewards



The Young and Dangerous film series was such a popular franchise that it spun 9 sequels and spin-offs from 1995 to 2000. The collection depicts a group of young triad members and their adventures, struggles, and growth in a Hong Kong triad society. It gives a down-to-earth representation of the local side of Hong Kong and its people, and, therefore, garnered great popularity, especially among young people in and outside Hong Kong (particularly Mainland China). However, the series was also denounced for glorifying the triad society and leading the youngsters to go astray.



Around 500,000 people went to the street to oppose the legislation of Basic Law Article 23 on 1 July 2003. Since the handover in 1997, protests have been held every year on the first of July to demand universal suffrage, protection of freedom of speech, and voice other political concerns, but it was not until 2003 that the march drew significant public attention.

(Bordwell, 1998).

The indigenesness of textual contents seems always to have been the focal point of Hong Kong filmmakers, whether younger or senior. The transnationality that the established generation kept emphasizing came primarily as a consequence of local consciousness in the golden times: the global identity Hong Kong possessed as a successful exporter of films to international markets (Teo, 2004). People outside the island city, on the other hand, have less interest in Hong Kong films nowadays. It is not only the underperforming economy of Hong Kong that has diminished people's admiration of the SAR, but also the rapid development of neighbouring film industries, diversification of entertainment worldwide, and most importantly, the declining nostalgic sentiments of the offspring of diasporic Chinese who no longer need Hong Kong cinema to comfort their homesickness, as their parents did. Living under vastly different conditions, the emerging generation has the same local consciousness as their predecessors but can hardly replicate the transnationality of the industry's prime epoch.

In young filmmakers' works, the blatant political implications form another feature by which they distinguish themselves from their apolitical predecessors.

Apolitical versus politically-minded

In sharp contrast to the situation in the 2000s and 2010s, Hong Kong as a British colony was a relatively politically peaceful region where public attention was primarily focused on the development of the economy. Even during the negotiations about the handover between the British and the Chinese in the 80s, the percentage of residents who cared about politics remained very low (Chan, 2015). Hong Kong filmmakers in that era were known as basically apolitical. Jessinta (Interview 47, line producer) reminisces about the days in the 70s and 80s, and sighing, explains that "it was such a tranquil period that none of us were even interested in politics." Therefore, making political films was a rarity for them. Instead, genre films with greater commercial potentials were the common choice.

Between 1997 to 2003, the polls reveal that even as the island city was handed over to Communist China, people's satisfaction with the city's political situation remained high due to China's guarantee that "the capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years." Beijing's proposal to add Article 23 to the Hong Kong Basic Law in February 2003 broke the peace and henceforth turned Hong Kong from an apolitical society to an increasingly politically-minded one. The article states that:

"The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organizations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organizations or bodies" (Basic Law Gov HK 2018).

A great controversy followed and led to a massive demonstration on 1 July 2003, with protestors accusing Beijing of intending to shackle freedom of expression in Hong Kong. Polls then displayed a dramatic increase in political dissatisfaction (Chan, 2015). In the same year, the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) was put into effect, which allowed mainland tourists to visit Hong Kong independently without being part of a tour group as had been previously



Once, infants born in Hong Kong automatically received the right to permanent residency in Hong Kong. For the multiple benefits granted, including high-quality and free 12-year-education, visa-free travel to around 168 countries and more, pregnant mainland women flocked to Hong Kong to give birth, particularly those who were restricted by China's one-child policy and wanted to have more children. The phenomenon caused an outrage among local pregnant women who got shut out of the maternity wards when beds were snapped up by mainland women. In 2012, more than 1500 local pregnant women and mothers took to the streets to oppose the growing number giving birth in the city and straining resources.

required. The massive influx of mainland tourists and immigrants that followed created fierce social conflicts in Hong Kong, such as those stemming from the temporary shortages of baby milk powder, medicines, and even medical services for pregnant women. Hong Kongers also complained about soaring house prices and rents due to mainland real estate speculators. In addition, certain codes of civility that had long been taken for granted were violated by mainland tourists, which caused widespread criticism. In response, the anti-mainland sentiment began to foment in the 2010s. Some protests, such as those in opposition to women from the mainland giving birth in Hong Kong represented a shift from targeting the Chinese Communist Party to focusing on ordinary mainland people, and a shift in methods from peaceful and orderly protests to violent confrontations with mainlanders and the police. The anti-mainland sentiment peaked in 2014 during the Umbrella Movement, which called for a free and fair election of the region's top leader.

The Youth Development Strategy for Hong Kong: Public Engagement Report, issued in 2017, revealed that young people in Hong Kong are craving more opportunities to participate in public affairs. They call for more constructive and inclusive dialogues with political leaders, and more diverse engagement channels through which to interact with government. Studies on youth civic engagement in Hong Kong have also indicated that young people are highly motivated to participate in civic activities. Due to advances in communication technology, they identify less with conventional political groups, and show new mobilization processes and patterns of participation. In the Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong Federation of Students was actively involved in the 79-day protest, and a significant number of protesters were secondary school students (Low, Busiol, & Lee 2016).

The Public Opinion Programme of The University of Hong Kong has been tracking Hong Kong people's self-identity since the handover. Between 2008 and 2016, those who identify themselves as "Hong Kongers," or "Hong Kongers in China" increased from 47.4% to 63.7%, while those who see themselves as "Chinese" or "Chinese in Hong Kong" reduced from 47% to 33.9%. The sentiment is more pronounced among the young, the 18 to 29-year-old category has shown dramatic shifts as the number of Hong Kong-identified youth surged from 58.3% to 83.8%, while the number of Chinese identified plunged from 41.2% to 13.3% (Zhang, Yau & Tsui, 2017). According to "Youth in Hong Kong: A Statistical Profile," among young people, those aged 15-24 had a slightly stronger sense of belonging to Hong Kong than those aged 25 and above. The trajectory of Hong Kongers' sense of Chinese identity has seen ups and downs, but in recent years it has been descending continually. This phenomenon is inextricably linked to how Hong Kongers perceive China itself (Zhang, Yau & Tsui, 2017).

Research has also found a significant relationship between happiness and dissenting political attitudes. Unhappy people are more likely to participate in protests and strikes (Veehoven, 1988; Chiu, 2015; Lorenzini, 2015). In Hong Kong, young people recently became the least happy age group (Chiu & Wong, 2018). Chiu & Wong (2018) noted that political factors have generally made Hong Kong people unhappier since 2008, but the recent improvement in socio-economic conditions, such as the increasing GDP per capita and rising house prices, have mitigated the decline of older people's happiness and as a result, the youth have become less happy than older people. Since 2011, Hong Kong youth have been more politically dissatisfied than their



In *Mad World* (2016), directed by young director Wong Chun, the protagonist Ah Tung suffers

from bipolar disorder and kills his paraplegic mother after an emotional break down caused by the great pressure of work, financial strain, and his mother's scolding. The movie is pervaded by a sense of depression about the living conditions of the city's poor, the massive pressure the working class faces, and the unsupportive medical system provided to patients with mental illnesses. The film won Best New Director at both the 53rd Golden Horse Awards and the 36th Hong Kong Film Awards.



The release of *Zombiology: Enjoy Yourself Tonight* (2017), stirred a heated debate about its possible political connotations. In his first feature film, young director Alan Lo Wai-Lun is widely considered to have equated the chicken monster that spreads the virus with China (as its outline on a map is roughly the shape of a rooster), and uses the two frustrated protagonists, Lung and Chi Yeung, as representatives of the current lost generation of young people.



The three hosts, Teresa Mo Shun Kwan, Lawrence Cheng Tan Shui, and Vincent Kok Tak Chiu, at the 30th anniversary gala of the Hong Kong Film Awards in 2011. They joined the film industry in the 1970s and 1980s.

elders.

According to the “Youth Development Strategy for Hong Kong: Public Engagement Report,” young people commonly perceived that there is a lack of positive career prospects in non-pillar or non-professional industries in Hong Kong. Unlike the mainstream industries, such as financial services, shipping and logistics, and tourism, the overall creative industry is still emerging in Hong Kong society. Information from youth.gov.hk, the online portal set up for young people by the Hong Kong government, reveals that from 2005 to 2014, the number of Hong Kongers engaged in the creative industry has been increasing at an annual growth rate of 1.6%, yet young people remained unconvinced of the long-term viability of the field.

In the film industry, the absence of the young generation is seen to be a structural issue. Jyu Jyun Fong, a famous Hong Kong entertainment reporter, wrote in her book *Hollywood Hong Kong* that:

“On the 30th anniversary gala of Hong Kong Film Awards in 2011, there were three hosts on the stage: Teresa Mo Shun Kwan, Lawrence Cheng Tan Shui, and Vincent Kok Tak Chiu. They asked the audience how many of them have been in the film industry for more than 30 years. Including their own, numerous hands raised. This scene was so touching and yet unfortunate. People who struggle on today for the glory of Hong Kong cinema are actually the pioneers who laid the foundations 30 years ago. Where are the successors?” (Fong 2011)

Established director Wong Jing points out a similar issue in his speech at the seminar titled ‘The New Norms of Film Co-production between Hong Kong and Mainland China,’ held during the Entertainment Expo Hong Kong on 14 March 2017. He claims that:

“We have to take actions to save Hong Kong film talents. The young generation of directors does not have enough opportunities to participate in making co-productions (with Mainland China). New directors, such as Philip Yung who made the *Port of Call*, are not young. I shot my first film at the age of 25, nowadays many Hong Kong directors shoot their first work at nearly 40.” (Kknews 2017)


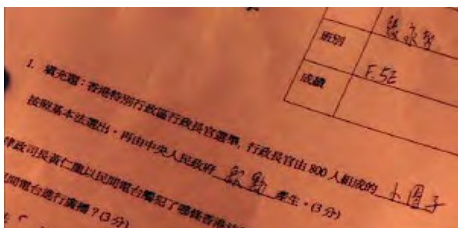
The co-productions with mainland China have drawn film talents north of the border and caused the scarcity of training opportunities for the younger generation locally. As Shu Kei, the previous Dean of the School of Film and Television at the Academy for Performing Arts, said, the current market does not allow young filmmakers to shine (Chow, 2016).

The overall sentiments of unhappiness, anti-mainland fervour, and political dissatisfaction shared by young people in Hong Kong can be discerned from the contents of local productions made by the SAR New Wave filmmakers in the 2010s. Being politically-minded, as they acknowledged, is pretty much being forced on them:

“I was forced to care, to partake in politics after the handover. Otherwise, the situation will only degenerate (Ho 2016).” — Kwun-wai Chow (young director)

“I used to prefer both romance and political films, now in this political predicament, it has boosted my desire to deal with political subjects” (Zeng, 2016).” — Au Man Kit Jevons (young director)

As young filmmakers feel increasingly called to create films that address contemporary social issues, it is inevitable that political conflict becomes a more frequent theme in their work, because the antagonism between Hong Kong and mainland China has become incorporated into every aspect of Hong Kong people's lives.

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| <p><i>Ten Years</i> (2015) is by far the most blatantly political movie made by the young generation of filmmakers in Hong Kong. In this film, the five young directors imagined 5 future scenarios for Hong Kong in short vignettes, some of which depicted full control of the government by the Beijing and the CCP, a total loss of Hong Kong local language and culture, and the bumpy road of the Hong Kong Independence Movement.</p> | <p>Some political implications are less blatant in films made by young directors. <i>High Noon</i> (2008), directed by Heiward Mak Hei Yan, is one of them. In the film, a high school boy jokingly fills answers to a question on the quiz by saying "in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Chief Executive Election, The Chief Executive is selected by a small circle of 800 people in accordance with the Basic Law, and then hand-picked by the Central People's Government."</p> |

One may challenge the idea and ask were the Hong Kong filmmakers of the Baby Boomer New Wave always apolitical? Peter Ho-sun Chan dismisses political interpretations many reviews had of the film *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996) by saying "that was not intended." He continues, explaining that "it's not intended to be a political film, but all films have some politics in them" (Wood, 1998:23).

It was also primarily out of market considerations that Hong Kong cinema before the SAR New Wave did not witness a flourishing of political films. Hong Kong audiences were particularly in favour of stimulating visuals, such as Kung Fu films, comedies and gangster films, plus the overseas audience, an important source of revenue, found political materials harder to comprehend (Lei, 2016). Since the Sino-British negotiations over Hong Kong's sovereignty, its peoples' political anxieties have increasingly been registered in films, but in an indirect, comical and ironic way. The political satire *Her Fatal Ways* (1990) is an example of this point. Director Alfred Cheung Kin Ting sensed the city's tension and decided to explore it in a genre that rarely appears in Hong Kong cinema. The film encountered an overwhelmingly positive response. Its box office performance inspired more political satires to be produced, such as the *Mainland Dundee* (1991), released the next year. Comedies such as the *Tricky Brains* (1991), starring one of the most outstanding Hong Kong comedians, Stephen Chow Sing Chi, have been spiced up with political jokes as well (Cheung, 2016 & Chen, 2016).



Comrades: Almost a Love Story (1996) depicts a story of two mainland immigrants in Hong Kong who fall in love with each other but who are driven apart by different future ambitions. A decade later they encounter each other again in the United States, where one is a cook and the

other an illegal immigrant. Some details in the film are interpreted as political, but the director Peter Ho-Sun Chan claims this was not intentional.



In the wake of the popularity of *Her Fatal Ways* (1990), *Mainland Dundee* (1991) was made to join the wave of political satires. In this movie, numerous political events and figures were mirrored in the jokes designed by director Jeffrey Chiang and scriptwriter Man-Cheuk Lai, such as the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, and politicians such as Jiang Qing (also known as the Madame Mao). For example, in one of the shots, when the leading actor Siu Fung discovers that the leading actress is about to work in France, he says, "Please send my regards to Wu'erkaixi." Wu'erkaixi was one of the student leaders in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, who later fled to France through Hong Kong.

Her Fatal Ways (1990) is a comedy that portrays a mainland officer for the Ministry of Public Security (MSP) who is tasked with extraditing a drug dealer to the Royal Hong Kong Police. Much of the humour is generated by depicting the officer as a die-hard communist and an uncivilised person. The film was a huge success in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and spawned three sequels, made in the early 90's.



In *Tricky Brains* (1991), Stephen Chow sarcastically states that "Li Peng is the greatest leader on earth." Whereas, to Hong Kong people, Li Peng is known as the "Butcher of Beijing" for his role in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests.

The real difference, as one respondent, a globally renowned film producer, points out, lays in the skills utilised in storytelling. The established generation was able to master the skill of hiding messages to make them acceptable to the censors and simultaneously entertaining to the audience (Interview 43, David, film producer/scriptwriter). The emerging young filmmakers seem eager to make their voices heard, but according to him are lacking the skills to hone their works into films that have broader market and audience appeal.

The new features of young filmmakers, namely being more self-expressive, locally-concerned and politically-minded are rooted deeply in economic, cultural, and political factors. This young generation has seen exhibited an alternative landscape among the dominating Hong Kong/Mainland co-productions, and brought about some new source of vitality for the contemporary Hong Kong cinema.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The 2014 blockbuster hit *American Sniper* exemplifies how the genre of the war Western has in recent years helped to rewrite the story of the Iraq War by disavowing the failure of U.S. “imperial policing.”



The 2018 war Western *12 Strong* reframes the U.S.'s failed war in Afghanistan by focusing on a single battle it won in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

War on Terror Westerns and the specter of imperial decline

by [Shakti Jaising](#)

Many in recent months have called attention to the U.S. government's racialized and xenophobic rhetoric in response to both the Coronavirus pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests. In the early stages of the pandemic, Donald Trump declared himself a “wartime president” and spoke of defending the United States against the “Chinese virus.”[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) A few months later, the President and others referred to protestors of police violence as dangerous “terrorists” and called for military force to “dominate” them. The brutal state repression of these protests, coupled with the pervasive language of “terror,” led some commentators to conclude that the War on Terror had come home—and that we had entered a moment in which the U.S. government's “rhetoric, legal framework, and military tactics developed over 20 years of the global war on terrorism” were being redirected against its own people.[2]

While it might appear that the War on Terror has only now “come home,” in fact, this imperial war has since its inception in the early 2000s generated an interlinked internal and an external dynamic, so that home front and battlefield have never been simply opposed to one another. In addition to increased military expenditure,[3] war has led simultaneously to the further arming of police forces within the United States.[4] Indeed, while the U.S. military has engaged in—what political commentator Michael Ignatieff, in the buildup to the Iraq War, termed —“imperial policing,”[5] police forces within the United States have come to resemble quasi-military units, especially in U.S. inner cities.

These developments are to a large extent the product of a neoliberal U.S. state that invests in “military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets” (Harvey 2). A neoliberal conception of the state's role has meant privileging defense spending at the expense of spending on infrastructure and social services, including public health.[6]

In places like Iraq, imperial policing paved the way for U.S. state-backed “disaster capitalism” that, for a while, “breathed new life into the faltering U.S. economy” (Klein 14). Iraq's public services were “raided,” as Naomi Klein notes, and made into “market opportunities” (6). Relief and reconstruction contracts were then farmed out to large corporations like Bechtel and Haliburton that feed the U.S. military-industrial-complex. Until the onset of the Great Recession of 2007-2008, this war-based disaster capitalism yielded “one of the fastest-growing service economies in the world” (Klein 15). Meanwhile within the United States, the arming of police forces led to intensified targeting of poor, underfunded, and racially segregated urban neighborhoods,[7] ultimately fueling capitalist takeover and gentrification.



Westerns —exemplified by the 1939 film, *Stagecoach*—stage battles between white settlers and Native Americans in an imagined 19th century, when there is little possibility of resisting settler colonialism.



Stagecoach revives American frontier mythology within the context of the Great Depression. John Wayne is the self-willed cowboy who unites whites across class lines, against the danger posed by native “savages.”



The apaches are the “savages” in *Stagecoach* who are defeated by white settlers.

But despite the actual linkages between domestic and foreign arenas of U.S. imperialism, political rhetoric as well as cultural representation have shaped imaginations through promoting a seeming “clash of civilizations.” Especially during the last decade, Hollywood has played a crucial role in animating this racist opposition—thereby distracting from military failures abroad and economic and political tension at home. In fact, when reading statements of top-ranking U.S. military officials in the recently released Afghanistan Papers, I found it hard *not* to think of Hollywood—for instance when these officials complain they did not know which “bad guys” they were fighting in Afghanistan. Here military officials express confusion about why the United States remains involved in Afghanistan and about what it has achieved after the government has spent \$978 billion on the longest war in U.S. history. But their statements also betray disappointment—over not finding the clear “enemy” or antagonist they had been given to expect by government propaganda and by Hollywood’s narratives of moral, racial, and civilizational clash.[8]

From the unique vantage point provided us by recent events, this paper looks back at a key genre of the post-9/11 period —the War on Terror Western[9]—that exemplifies the ways in which Hollywood has kept alive faith in imperial policing, in spite of failed wars and imperial decline.[10] In particular, films of the last decade—such as the blockbuster hit, *American Sniper* (Dir. Clint Eastwood, 2014) and the relatively modest success, *12 Strong* (Dir. Nicolai Fuglsig, 2018)—have helped revive waning faith in U.S. supremacy amidst the realities of military failures and economic collapse. These recent films have narrated the Iraq and Afghanistan wars by reactivating the affect of the post-9/11 moment, especially its fetishization of cowboy masculinity and its framing of the “Muslim world” as a frontier for U.S. expansion. But in addition to narratively defending the U.S. military-industrial-complex and its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, these films have “clash of civilizations” plots that obfuscate the economic context of those employed by the U.S. military, the largest public sector employer and a vital means of accessing healthcare and education in a nation committed to cutting and privatizing essential services.

Much of my emphasis in what follows will be on *American Sniper*, which not only enjoyed tremendous commercial success but also elicited much controversy. However, this film’s links with *12 Strong* are also crucial to examine in order to identify the key attributes of the recent turn in cinematic representations of the War on Terror. Both *American Sniper* and *12 Strong* deny the actual waning of U.S. dominance, which the Great Recession and now the pandemic and subsequent state repression have brought into particular relief. Ultimately, their nostalgia-filled, reactionary, and revisionist narratives of the post-9/11 U.S. wars lay bare—and hence allow valuable insight into—the cultural politics of an empire in decline.

The War on Terror Western

The Western genre has its roots in the United States’ history of settler colonialism. As Shohat and Stam have pointed out, Westerns typically

“place us at a historical moment when the penetration of the [U.S.] frontier is already well under way, ... and when there is little likelihood that Native Americans will mount a successful resistance to European occupation.” (115)

Across these various settings, the Western plot involves a self-willed white cowboy rescuing “civilized” Europeans from native—deemed “savage”—populations in order to, in Richard Dyer’s words, establish and maintain the frontier “between established and unestablished order, a border that is not crossed but pushed

endlessly back” (33).

After having enjoyed its heyday between the 1930s and 1960s, the Western “made something of a comeback in the United States in the post-9/11 period” (Kollin 28). The Western’s conventions provided familiar language and iconography through which U.S. politicians and cultural producers framed the War on Terror. In the days following 9/11, President George Bush Jr. instrumentalized his Texan background to model himself as a modern cowboy who could capture Osama Bin Laden “dead or alive.” At the same time, mainstream media framed the New York fireman as a cowboy figure,

“a guardian of the homestead, a manly man... particularly suited to protecting and providing for the isolated American family in perilous situations” (Faludi 286-287).

Subsequently, political thrillers including television series like *24* (2001-2010) as well as films like *Taken* (Dir. Pierre Morel 2008) and *Argo* (Dir. Ben Affleck, 2012) drew on the codes of the Western, often by featuring “U.S. hostages... in need of a liberating cowboy hero ...[to] bring them back home safely” (Kollin 4). Moreover, if the traditional Western drew on and perpetuated Frontier mythology, based on “the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited” the United States (Slotkin 10), then with the start of the War on Terror this Frontier mythology was re-invoked and “‘Indian country’ ...relocated overseas” (Kollin 23).



The Western made a comeback in the post-9/11 period, in part through shows like *24*, whose protagonist Jack Bauer defends U.S. “civilization” from foreign threats.



The 2008 film *Taken* exemplifies some of the ways Western codes were being nostalgically revived in post-9/11 cinema.



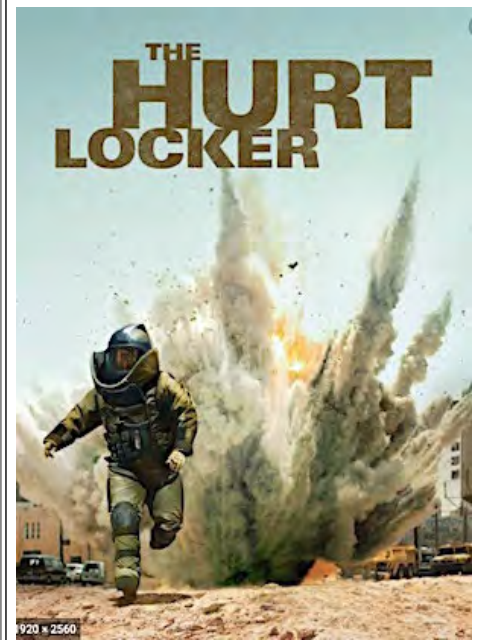
Like *Taken*, *Argo*'s plot revolves around U.S. hostages in need of cowboy intervention.

The resuscitation of the Western in the immediate post-9/11 context enabled a cultural defense of the U.S.’s political and economic incursions into the Middle East and South Asia. But the genre was being invoked in these early years not merely for the purpose of justifying war. Susan Kollin notes that some cinematic releases of the first decade of the War on Terror drew on the Western’s settings

and character types in order to raise questions about the genre's fundamental opposition between savagery and civilization that was born out of the U.S. history of settler colonialism. For instance, *In the Valley of Elah* (Dir. Paul Haggis, 2007) raised questions about the “personal and social costs of sending sons to war” (Kollin 154); and *The Hurt Locker* (Dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 2009) “unsettle[d] divisions between savagery and civilization” (Kollin 163), by sensitizing viewers to Iraqis’ daily experience of war. Such films channeled the anti-war sentiment expressed by large numbers of people in the United States and around the world. [11]



The 2007 film *In the Valley of Elah* drew on conventions of the Western to question war.



Kathryn Bigelow's 2008 release, *The Hurt Locker* questioned the cowboy masculinity of its protagonist, a U.S. soldier in Iraq.

By the second decade of the War on Terror, however, such questioning of war had been disappeared from U.S. cultural production. In this decade public opposition to the U.S. wars was muted— symptomatic of the retreat of the anti-war movement, and growing resignation to unsuccessful, endless militarism, especially amid mounting economic insecurity in the aftermath of the Great Recession. With military failures on the warfront and economic desperation on the homefront, the U.S. government used the capture of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011 and subsequent troop withdrawal from Iraq in late 2011 to shift public discourse and promote the perception that the War on Terror had ended successfully—even though deadly air raids and drone attacks continued as the U.S. military struggled to contain new terrorist formations like ISIS.

This state-promoted perception of a successful end to war allowed Hollywood writers and producers to risk putting out more conventionally entertaining war narratives. In a few months following Bin Laden's capture, director Kathryn Bigelow and scriptwriter Mark Boal—with the active assistance of the CIA, Pentagon, and the White House[12]—produced *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), a critically acclaimed and commercially successful thriller about the Americans who led the manhunt for the Al Qaeda leader in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bigelow's film became the highest grossing War on Terror film at the time of its release—making way for a spate of commercially successful, patriotic narratives that in effect rewrote the story of post-9/11 U.S. military exploits.

In the coming years, while the U.S. economy appeared to be in a state of



Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* became the highest grossing War on Terror film, when it was released in 2012. The film narrates the U.S.'s successful manhunt for Osama bin Laden – and is markedly devoid of any critique of war.

permanent decline, War on Terror dramas moved from being commercially risky to potentially profitable. For example, the television series *Homeland* (2011-) played out reassuring scenarios of conflict between white American “civilization” and Muslim “savagery.” Simultaneously, film releases like *Lone Survivor* (2013) offered thrilling action sequences set against the backdrop of Afghanistan’s desert landscapes. Although, as the Afghanistan Papers have revealed, top U.S. military officials did not understand what the U.S. military was doing in Afghanistan and contested the notion that the U.S. presence was improving life for Afghans, television shows like *Homeland* and cinematic thrillers like *Lone Survivor* registered few signs of uncertainty or ambiguity.

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| <p>The female cowboy protagonist of the television show <i>Homeland</i> (2011-) shows no signs of uncertainty regarding the war in Afghanistan.</p> | <p>The 2013 Afghanistan-based thriller, <i>Lone Survivor</i> exemplifies how war cinema in the second decade of the War on Terror became more conventional and also more profitable.</p> |

With the December 2014 release of Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper*, the



With the December 2014 release of Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* the fetishized cowboy masculinity of the post-9/11 period was refashioned into highly profitable entertainment. Bradley Cooper plays Chris Kyle— a former Navy SEAL from Texas and present-day cowboy.



Kyle is a “sharpshooter” in the Iraq War. *American Sniper* aligns us with his militarized gaze.



American Sniper's success made room for a host of conventional war Westerns, including *12 Strong* that nostalgically revives the horse-riding cowboy and uncritically celebrates his masculinity.

fetishized cowboy masculinity of the post-9/11 period was refashioned into profitable entertainment. *American Sniper* broke box-office records, surpassing even the World War II blockbuster, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). [13] It gave the lie to what one reviewer called “a film-industry truism (and, one imagines, a studio-boardroom cautionary tale) that movies about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan perform poorly at the box office.” [14] Warner Bros. sold this Iraq war film—based on former Navy SEAL Chris Kyle’s memoir[15]—as an apolitical, “personal story about soldiers,” and the studio “aggressively courted members of the military and veterans groups” by “hiring Glover Park Group, a leading Washington-based consultancy firm.” [16]

The controversy that subsequently arose—around whether the film was glorifying war, or was anti-war as Eastwood and scriptwriter Jason Hall claimed[17]—only added to *American Sniper*’s marketability. In the United States, the film proved to be a hit among both liberal and conservative audiences; outside the United States, the film’s success was enabled by its blending of action/thriller conventions with those of the classical Western. In addition to the film’s connection to Eastwood, a former Western hero, *American Sniper* invoked the Hollywood Western through its construction of Kyle (Bradley Cooper) as a present-day cowboy, rugged individualist, and exceptionally skilled sharpshooter from Texas[18].

The success of *American Sniper* gave way to a host of conventional war narratives, including *12 Strong*, a triumphalist portrayal of the Afghanistan war, based on the non-fiction bestseller by Doug Stanton, *Horse Soldiers* (2009). With its iconography of horse-riding cowboy-soldiers, *12 Strong* recalled the classical Western and was received as a new version of this genre.[19] Although nowhere as commercially successful nor as debated and discussed as *American Sniper*, *12 Strong* is nevertheless also engaged in rewriting the story of the post-9/11 U.S. wars; the film, moreover, repeatedly reminds viewers of the truth value of the events it represents.

Whereas earlier War on Terror films like *The Hurt Locker* included brief domestic scenes and shots of street life that suggest a clash between war and everyday life, *12 Strong*—like *American Sniper*— features only hollowed-out buildings and social relations in the areas occupied by the U.S. military. Indeed, both of these recent war Westerns make it hard to imagine domestic life in the Middle East and South Asia lived prior to or amidst war. Further, if *The Hurt Locker*—like *In the Valley of Elah*—raised questions about cowboy masculinity, then *American Sniper* and *12 Strong* uncritically celebrate this masculinity. In fact, *American Sniper* and *12 Strong* reactivate post-9/11 nostalgia for the “manly man” and “guardian of the homestead”—indicative of a reactionary and revisionist turn in War on Terror fiction film.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Double nostalgia



Cutting between these two boys in *American Sniper* allows the film to flashback from the “new” West (Iraq) to the old West (Texas), where a young Kyle learns to shoot.

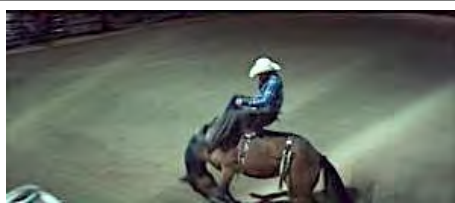


Kyle's relationship with his father explains how he was molded into an old-fashioned man.

Nostalgia, Linda Hutcheon has argued, “is less about the past than about the present” (20), given that “the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past.” Thus, the past for which we are nostalgic is not the “past as actually experienced” but rather “the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire” (20). Drawing on Hutcheon we might say that following 9/11, an ideal of U.S. dominance fractured by the terrorist attacks became projected onto the imagined past of Hollywood Westerns, when “manly men” could serve as “virile and vigilant guardians of [America’s] frontier” (Faludi 281) and “restore Americans’ confidence in the country’s impregnability” (Faludi 286).

American Sniper and *12 Strong* might be seen as charged by a *double* nostalgia—nostalgia *of* as well as nostalgia *for* the post-9/11 moment. Put differently, these films are nostalgic for the experience of innocent victimization in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, even as they share the nostalgic yearning for impenetrable masculinity that constituted the structure of feeling of this historical moment. After the 9/11 attacks the nation was ostensibly united by the experience of shared vulnerability, the nostalgic return to an old ideal of white cowboy masculinity seemed justified, and the motivation to launch war against a foreign enemy seemed clear. *American Sniper* and *12 Strong* revive the emotional tenor of the immediate post-9/11 moment, in response to failures on the battlefield as well as economic decline and political polarization at home.

We are aware of nostalgia early in *American Sniper* when flashbacks take us from the new West—i.e. war-torn Iraq—to an older West—rural and suburban Texas, where Kyle grows up under an old-fashioned, disciplinarian Christian father. Scenes with his father establish Kyle as a somewhat anachronistic character who, despite growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, is trained to see his role as that of a “sheepdog” for his family and nation. The power of these flashback scenes lies in their sensory appeal. They pull viewers to identify with Kyle on a visceral level and thereby to participate in the film’s affective investment in an old-fashioned, white masculinity. When we see a grown-up Kyle at the rodeo—in a scene most clearly evocative of the Western—the shaky camera tries to capture his visceral experience of trying to stay upright on the leaping animal. When the film then cuts to admiring women watching him, we are asked to think of this display of masculinity as charming, precisely for seeming outdated.



As a young man Kyle participates in a rodeo. The camerawork evokes his bodily experience.



The cheering women prompt us to see Kyle's masculinity as charming, precisely for being outdated.

Occasionally, even as it invites us to viscerally identify with a young Kyle's innocence, the film simultaneously expresses wariness of his masculinity. For



The camera maintains an ironic distance from Kyle, to comment on his violence against his girlfriend's lover—but irony only makes nostalgia more palatable for the contemporary audience.



The introduction of Taya, Kyle's spirited wife, also makes palatable the film's nostalgia for Kyle's cowboy masculinity.

instance, when Kyle beats up a man his girlfriend has sex with, the camera maintains a distance from him. Here the film seems to express an ironic awareness of how unseemly his behavior might seem to contemporary liberal viewers. However, the scene also works in a way that Hutcheon describes:

“The knowingness of irony may be not so much a defense against the power of nostalgia as the way in which nostalgia is made palatable today: invoked but, at the same time, undercut, put into perspective, seen for exactly what it is—a comment on the present as much as on the past” (23).

Indeed, such scenes in *American Sniper* ultimately make nostalgia for outdated masculinity palatable to a liberal audience, by undercutting it at times with “the knowingness of irony.”

In addition to moments of ironic self-awareness, the film's introduction of Taya (Sienna Miller), Kyle's independent and spirited wife, also makes palatable its nostalgia. In contrast to a married character who pretends he is single as he tries to court the feisty Taya, Kyle emerges as straightforward and reliable. In their first meeting he tells her that he aspires to be a cowboy and that he would lay down his life for his country. Despite her wariness of Navy SEALs, Taya finds herself won over by Kyle's earnestness. As we note Taya's gradually softened disposition, the viewer, too, is cued to have more tolerance for Kyle's cowboy masculinity—which we come to understand as being more humane than that of other military men.



American Sniper's nostalgia is made clear through recurring shots of the white couple in bed, Kyle on the outside, encircling Taya in his arms.



The couple's reactions to the 9/11 attacks. The film's nostalgia is for not just cowboy masculinity but also Americans' experience of innocent victimization following the attacks.

When they get together, this masculinity is repeatedly affirmed through scenes that show the white couple in bed, Kyle encircling Taya in his arms, reassuring her with his unambivalent faith in getting married and starting a family. Similarly, in the scene where Kyle and Taya watch the 9/11 attacks on TV, Kyle puts his arm around Taya and pulls her towards him. Here, as in the scenes in bed, the film uses the purported universality of this traditionally gendered, white, heterosexual couple to frame Americans as innocent victims of disaster that deserve retribution. These scenes with Kyle and Taya are perhaps most powerful in eliciting viewer engagement in the affect of the film's *double* nostalgia.

12 Strong, released a few years after *American Sniper*, also draws on tropes and iconography of the Hollywood Western, and it is similarly infused with nostalgia for the cowboy masculinity fetishized during the post-9/11 moment. The Western genre is invoked at several moments in the film, especially in gun fighting scenes that occur against a mountainous landscape (filmed in New Mexico). [20] Also evocative are shots of protagonist Mitch Nelson (Chris Hemsworth) on horseback, riding toward the camera—or wide shots of all the riders together, their uniformity visible from a distance and underscored by soaring orchestral music that cues us to read their actions as heroic.

In fact, *12 Strong* is in many ways more traditional than *American Sniper*, devoid as it is of any trace of irony about its protagonist's idealized masculinity. Further, the innocence and intimacy of the U.S. nuclear family are highlighted from the



Afghanistan is framed as a new frontier for U.S. expansion through landscape shots in *12 Strong*



12 Strong's protagonist Mitch Nelson (Chris Hemsworth) clearly resembles the cowboy hero of classic Westerns.

very beginning, as highly conventional, softly lit, close ups of Mitch, his wife (Elsa Pataky), and young daughter show the family preparing to send the child to school just as they are interrupted by televised images of the 9/11 attacks. As in *American Sniper*, the contrast between the televised images of 9/11 and this white family's familiar domesticity sets the stage for justifying U.S. military invasion—in this case, of Afghanistan.



Horse-riding U.S. soldiers in *12 Strong* nostalgically revive the pleasures of the Western's battle sequences between cowboys and "savages."



Softly lit scenes in *12 Strong* establish the innocence of Mitch Nelson's white American family—whose daughter is being sent to school on the morning of 9/11.



As in *American Sniper*, the innocent white family's reactions to 9/11 help justify imperial policing.



Subsequent scenes show the traditionally gendered, heterosexual couple preparing for Mitch's departure. Mitch (much like Kyle) encircles his wife in bed and reassures her. She, in the patriarchal tradition of U.S. war movies, calls herself "a soldier's wife" and makes him promise that he will return home for Christmas.[21] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] This scene anchors the plot. The action in Afghanistan is reduced to three weeks because of Mitch's pledge to return to his family at Christmas.





It is precisely this highly formulaic, un-ironic transposition of Hollywood conventions to the Afghanistan war that makes *12 Strong* far less emotionally and ideologically compelling than *American Sniper*. Indeed, although *12 Strong* is informed with the same nostalgic perspective as *American Sniper*, it fails to absorb and entangle the viewer in the affect of double nostalgia. *American Sniper*, on the other hand, repeatedly uses a strategy of crosscutting between dangerous combat zones and relatively secure American domestic spaces to engage us viscerally in, what the film frames as, the dangers faced by the white American family.



Like *American Sniper*, *12 Strong* features a traditionally gendered white heterosexual couple—and expresses nostalgia for both cowboy masculinity and the affect of the post-9/11 moment.

In one noteworthy scene, *American Sniper* cuts between a shootout in Iraq and pregnant Taya telling Chris on the phone that they are going to have a baby boy. Cross cutting creates a titillating sensory experience, as we move—often abruptly and jarringly—between the violence and bodily exertion of battle on the one hand and the physical precariousness of pregnant Taya on the other. The scene's visceral impact serves to heighten the trauma of the couple's separation and thereby advance the film's argument about the necessity, but also costs, of

imperial policing for the American family.

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|  |  |
| Crosscutting in <i>American Sniper</i> between pregnant Taya in the U.S. and Kyle in Iraq heightens the opposition between (innocent) home front and battlefield. | |
|  |  |
| Kyle's dropped cell phone relays Taya's cries from the U.S., reminding us of the costs of war for the innocent U.S. family. | Kyle's discomfort with his child on returning from war prompts us to mourn the loss of this once ideal nuclear family. |

Ultimately, this white heterosexual couple's construction as innocent victims of war displaces responsibility for the cowboy hero's—and imperial America's—racism and violence against Iraqis. When Kyle returns home for a brief reprieve for war, he seems preoccupied with Iraqis—whom he calls “fucking savages.” When Taya cuts him off with, “It's not about them; it's about us,” and places their baby in his arms, we are once again reminded of the costs of imperial policing for the American family. The camera then zooms into Kyle's face as he is left holding the baby—after which the film cuts promptly to his second tour in Iraq. The image of a helpless Kyle with an innocent infant in his arms, followed by the abrupt transition to his next military tour, makes us mourn the loss of this once ideal American patriarch. Kyle's and the film's racism towards Iraqis is thus disavowed through the framing of this moment as evidence of war's trauma for the white U.S. soldier and his family.

The new Wild West

Further contributing to *American Sniper*'s racism are the recurring shots of depopulated, rubble-filled Iraqi spaces. When the film begins, sounds of the Muslim call for prayer are overwhelmed by the noise of a gigantic U.S. military tank, as the camera tilts down to capture its mammoth wheels moving through a vast expanse of rubble, and confirming America's mastery over this eviscerated and potentially anarchic space. Throughout the film, Kyle refers to Iraq as “dirt;”[22] and in the opening scene his colleague echoes his words when he remarks that the dirt “tastes like dogshit.” If Iraq is simply dirt, then, the film implies, its occupation by the United States military might even be desirable for its transformation from anarchy to civilization, from underdevelopment to development.



When Kyle arrives in Fallujah on his first tour, he is introduced to this evacuated city as “the new wild west of the Old Middle East.” This language of a new “wild West”—a powerful genre cue—underlies the barely populated vistas of *12 Strong* as well. The soldiers in the film refer to the area near Mazar-i-Sharif as “The Alamo,” thereby explicitly invoking the U.S. West. When the men begin to ride horses, this connection is strengthened. Mitch emerges as the only one who

In contrast to the richly developed domestic contexts of the U.S., *American Sniper* presents Iraq as rubble-filled and devoid of ordinary domesticity.



Kyle and his colleagues refer to Iraq as “dirt.” Iraq is framed as the “new wild west.”



General Dostum, the only Afghan we come to know in *12 Strong*, does not have a partner or a nuclear family—in contrast with Mitch Nelson and other U.S. soldiers.



Domesticity in *American Sniper*'s Iraq is often represented through clotheslines. But these brief signs of ordinary life appear through the lens of Kyle's rifle

already knows how to ride a horse. He is also the only one who speaks a language other than English (Russian) that the Afghan General Dostum (Navid Neghaban) can understand. In other words, he appears, as a reincarnation of the trope of the cowboy who knows how to communicate with the Indians.



The explicit iconography of the Western in *12 Strong* reinforces the sense that Afghanistan is a new “wild West” – in need of being civilized

In both *12 Strong* and *American Sniper* we rarely see signs of non-American (i.e. Afghan and Iraqi) domesticity. In the Afghanistan of *12 Strong*, family life seems almost nonexistent—and when we see children, it is unclear who their parents are. General Dostum, the only Afghan with whom we become somewhat intimate because of Mitch's friendship with him, does not have a partner or a nuclear family. This absence of domesticity in Afghanistan—in contrast with our immersion in white domesticity in the U.S. context—further the sense of Afghanistan as the new Wild West.

Similarly, in the Iraqi homes that U.S. soldiers invade in *American Sniper*, family relations appear tenuous or at best indecipherable—especially relative to the fully fleshed out dynamics of Kyle's white American family. When we do see signs of everyday life in Iraq, we are reminded immediately that this domesticity is simply a front for terrorist violence. In an early scene, we watch—through Kyle's rifle—the back of a woman hanging clothes on a clothesline. This brief glimpse into domestic life is followed in the next instant by the camera/gun panning to a man trying to bury a grenade. Kyle wipes the man out with a sniper bullet and then continues to look through his viewfinder at another clothesline, followed immediately by his killing of yet another Iraqi man with a gun. We also watch through Kyle's rifle a woman walk out of a residential building with a child—and our suspicions are confirmed when Kyle notices that the duo are in fact carrying a grenade. In a later scene, Kyle and his colleagues are invited to Eid supper by an Iraqi family, but he ends up discovering a stash of guns—further evidence of how seemingly innocent family life in Iraq inevitably masks terrorism.



American Sniper suggests that family life in Iraq is merely a cover for terrorism—as in this scene where a woman gives a child a grenade.



The “black hat” antagonist of Westerns is revived in *American Sniper* in the character of The Butcher—an Iraqi who murders his own people.

When *American Sniper* does touch on family relations among Iraqis, it ends up marginalizing the experiences of Iraqi victims of violence, while shifting the viewer's attention to Kyle's trauma and its impact on *his* family. This is made clear in an especially violent scene involving the Sheikh Al-Obeidi and Amir Khalaf Fanus—also known as “The Butcher.” The scene cuts rapidly between a frantic

Sheikh—whose son is being tortured by The Butcher—and Kyle who is narrowly escaping the sniper Mustafa's bullets while also fighting off an attack dog. The Butcher, dressed in black like the "black hat" of Hollywood Westerns,[23] tortures and kills the Sheikh's son using a drill. We watch fragments of this horrific episode, while hearing sounds of the drill and of the boy's screaming relatives. Eventually the Sheikh, too, is killed—proof of the violence inflicted on Iraqis by their *own* people, rather than by U.S. perpetrators. But not only is the violence of an invading U.S. military disavowed, but also the chaos generated by crosscutting serves to heighten the viewer's fear for Kyle, who is being hunted down and at risk of being permanently traumatized. Indeed, the Sheikh's death and that of his son function primarily as catalysts for representing Kyle's eventual descent into post-traumatic stress disorder.[24]



When we see The Butcher murder an Iraqi father and son, our alignment remains with Kyle, who is being pursued by Mustafa. As Mustafa aims his gun at us, we sense Kyle's anguish—rather than that of the "butchered" Iraqi family.



Throughout *American Sniper*, tight close ups align us with Kyle's subjectivity and attune us to his post-traumatic stress.

12 Strong features a similarly horrific scene of violence. Here, too, the violence is shown to be perpetrated by Muslims against others of their faith—and not by U.S. invaders. In this scene the "black hat," Mullah Razzan—leader of the fundamentalist Taliban—butchers an innocent Afghan woman because she is educating young girls. The function of the gory violence is to prepare the viewer to understand the stakes: the Taliban are killing their own people and their misogyny is a civilizational threat, affecting progressive Afghan women but also white American families like Mitch's who—as we see at the start of the film—send their daughters to school. The killing takes place against the silhouettes of crumbling buildings, proof of the general lawlessness and barrenness of Afghan society. This physical and relational barrenness of Afghanistan—made pronounced by its contrast with the softly lit and richly fleshed out domestic spaces of American suburbia—implies that only invading American cowboy soldiers can bring Afghans relief from religious fundamentalism, as well as from economic deprivation and underdevelopment.



Mullah Razzan is the "black hat" of *12 Strong*.



Like The Butcher of *American Sniper*, Mullah Razzan murders his own people.



In a horrific, misogynist act of violence, Razzan murders a teacher for educating young girls. His barbarism is used to confirm the need for imperial policing.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Mitch's wife and daughter rejoice on his triumphant return from Afghanistan. The film reframes the U.S.'s failed war through the story of Mitch and his team's successful mission.



Supporting *12 Strong's* revisionist history of the Afghanistan war is the figure of the willing soldier. Mitch volunteers to lead his team in battle.



In *American Sniper*, Kyle willingly enlists after

The domestic arena of U.S. empire

In the end, *12 Strong* re-frames the unending Afghanistan war through scenes of U.S. victory in a battle with Mullah Razzan and his men. Watching this successful battle, the viewer is left with a sense that justice has been delivered for all—victimized and progressive Afghan women as well as endangered (white) American families. As we look at pictures of the original team of twelve sent to Afghanistan, the final titles remind us: “The capture of Mazar-i-Sharif by the Horse Soldiers and their counterparts is one of the U.S. Military’s most stunning achievements.” We are also told: “In 2014, General Dostum became Vice President of Afghanistan. Dostum and Mitch Nelson remain close friends to this day.” Through this friendship the film brings closure to what in reality is an unresolved political conflict and a failure for the United States as well as the millions of Afghans who have lost their loved ones and seen their society destroyed by war. If early War on Terror films like *The Hurt Locker* and *In the Valley of Elah* denied closure and suggested instead the endlessness of imperial war, *12 Strong* participates in a revisionist history through its staging of battle between horse-riding cowboy soldiers and archetypical Western villains.

Indeed, the quintessential scenario of both *American Sniper* and *12 Strong*—confrontation between “good guys” and “bad guys,” cowboy heroes and savage terrorists—provides narrative and ideological coherence to the United States’ unsuccessful interventions in the Middle East and South Asia. But in addition to substituting the complex realities in Iraq and Afghanistan with the simplicity of battle scenes between cowboys and “bad guys,” *American Sniper* and *12 Strong* occlude also the domestic politics of the United States, particularly the context of those employed by the U.S. military.

12 Strong presents Mitch Nelson as a maverick cowboy hero who stands apart with his confidence, and who is principled and not afraid to fight for his country. Despite having never served in combat, he volunteers to lead his team in the frontier zones of Afghanistan. The men in his team unanimously appreciate his leadership and willingly join him in battle. After boarding the helicopter headed to northern Afghanistan, they all break out into singing “The Ballad of the Green Berets,” the title song for the Vietnam War John Wayne film, *The Green Berets*—thus prompting the audience to, in nostalgic mode, see *12 Strong* as part of a longer tradition of classic, patriotic, war-Westerns. If *The Green Berets* countered resistance against the drafting of soldiers for the Vietnam War by portraying willing U.S. soldiers, then *12 Strong* counters present-day critiques of the Afghanistan war through its idealized portrait of the U.S.’s all-volunteer military. Moreover, given that Mitch returns victorious—and not traumatized—to his white, suburban nuclear family, *12 Strong* denies also the lingering effects of war trauma for returning soldiers.

In *American Sniper* we are given to understand that Kyle’s traditional sense of masculine responsibility leads him to enlist in the Navy after he watches TV footage of the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi—in a scene that anticipates 9/11. The film invites us to apprehend Kyle’s emotional and mental process as it cuts back and forth between the TV screen and slow zoom-ins on his face; eventually, he mumbles in horror, “Look what they did to us.” Similar zoom-ins throughout the film invite the viewer to understand Kyle’s

watching news of the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies. The willing white soldier masks realities of enlistment—including the military's targeting of poor people and people of color.

sensitivity towards, what he perceives as, America's humiliation by Muslim terrorists. The following scene shows him signing up to become a Navy SEAL who is "looking to be of service." Kyle emerges as an old-fashioned, quintessentially American, white male who is motivated to join the armed forces *not* by material necessity but rather—much like the mythical cowboy of Hollywood Westerns—by an internal need to protect his people from violence and humiliation.

In other words, the white cowboy-soldiers in both *12 Strong* and *American Sniper* fight *willingly* to protect their innocent American families and nation from outside threats. In this role they appear unburdened by material concerns and also uninfluenced by military recruiters. The films' erasure of economic pressures on soldiers is particularly striking given that they were released at a time when the United States, following the 2008-09 recession, was characterized by stagnant wages, rising debt, and a well-funded military-industrial complex.

Even today, many continue to enlist because the U.S. military—the largest public sector employer in the country—is a source of relative economic stability and a draw, therefore, for populations from depressed towns, inner cities, and remote areas that are left with few comparable opportunities for geographic and economic mobility.

"[A]s of 2004, almost two-thirds of recruits in the U.S. Army came from counties in which median household income was below the countrywide median. The army remains one of the few ways in the United States for the working class to get universal health care and a free college education."

This is largely the case because the neoliberal state "skimp[s] on social services and education spending in poor and minority communities." [25] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Still, especially in lower enlisted ranks of the military, service members and their families often have trouble making ends meet; many are even compelled to live off food stamps. [26] Further, despite the centrality of the military in the U.S. economy, returning soldiers often find themselves inadequately supported as they try to re-enter civilian life, battling not only post-traumatic stress but also economic vulnerability.

These realities of active-duty as well as returning soldiers are completely glossed over in *12 Strong*. But even *American Sniper*, which explicitly acknowledges the challenges of post-traumatic stress disorder, glosses over the fact that Kyle is killed by a traumatized colleague in the United States, rather than by "bad guys" in Iraq. Shortly after we hear sounds of the gunshot that kills Kyle, the film ends with images of an elaborate, state-sponsored funeral. Thus, we learn next to nothing about the veteran who kills Kyle. The film's final moments, and subsequent intertitles, make Kyle into a martyr. The killing is framed as an unlucky accident rather than a reflection of structural problems related to the care and rehabilitation of veterans of war.

Beyond mystifying economic realities and glossing over the psychic aftereffects of war on U.S. military personnel, both *American Sniper* and *12 Strong* obscure the explicit and increased targeting of people of color by the military. It is now a known fact that military recruitment efforts target low-income Black and Latinx populations.

"The strategy of targeting poor, working-class, and Black and Latinx people for military conscription is known as the 'poverty draft.'" [27]

Junior ROTC programs often focus on public schools in impoverished areas, many of which are populated predominantly by youth of color. Moreover, often these schools lack other forms of vocational counseling, making the military seem



This war veteran kills Kyle on his return home from Iraq. By eliding this veteran's story, *American Sniper* glosses over structural problems related to the care of U.S. war veterans.

like the only option.[28] A 2016 study also asserts that there are “two Americas of military sacrifice”:

“Today, unlike in World War II, the Americans who die or are wounded in war are disproportionately coming from poorer parts of the country.”[29]



U.S. soldiers break into an Iraqi home in *American Sniper*. The repetition of such shots has helped to normalize U.S. military violence abroad.



U.S. soldiers prepare to invade an Afghan home in *Homeland*. Imperial violence is deemed necessary for the protection of not just Americans but also local populations.



A still from the U.S. crime drama, *Cops*. War on Terror films’ normalization of military violence

With their overwhelming focus on white, middle-class U.S. soldiers who *choose* to go to war, unimpeded by economic and material concerns, *American Sniper* and *12 Strong* reinforce public denial about how poor people and people of color end up being those who most heavily bear the costs of their government’s wars. Furthermore, through their fetishization of white cowboy heroes, both films contribute to reinforcing already existing racist iconography and discourse within the United States. Indeed, the repeated scenes in *American Sniper* of mostly white U.S. soldiers barging into Iraqi homes and violently assaulting civilians are strongly reminiscent of domestic police dramas that regularly show police invading the homes of people of color. The reality TV show, *Cops*, for instance, “the longest-running reality TV show in U.S. history,” has habituated U.S. viewers to police violence against people of color, through its tense, action-filled scenes of “black, Latinx, and poor men [being] harangued, choked, slammed, shot at, and handcuffed by [mostly white] police officers, with no meaningful context or resolution to any given human being’s situation.”[30] Films like *American Sniper* perform a similar role, by habituating U.S. viewers to scenes in which U.S. soldiers invade the homes of people in the Middle East and South Asia, and where their violence is seen as not only justified but also necessary for the greater common good.

Further, the absence of pushback from Iraqis in *American Sniper* is also continuous with U.S. crime dramas that convey the legitimacy of white American power. Like the people of color represented in shows like *Cops*, Iraqis in *American Sniper* and Afghans in *12 Strong* appear as either guilty of “crime”—therefore deserving to be assaulted or shot at—or else as incapable of protesting interruption by militarized forces. In the very brief instance in *American Sniper* when we see a crowd protesting the killing of Iraqis by U.S. soldiers, their faces look menacing and their words are untranslated. In the absence of information about the reason for their protest, and without any intimacy with their home lives and domestic context, the film implies that these protestors are part of Al Qaeda, rather than potentially civilians protesting the U.S. military.

Finally, just as domestic crime dramas like *Cops* have, by exaggerating the extent of violent crime in U.S. cities,[31] helped justify the need for violent policing as well as the capitalist takeover of systematically neglected neighborhoods that are often home to communities of color, War on Terror Westerns have, through the legitimization of military violence against Muslim nations and their citizens, indirectly justified disaster capitalism in these nations. The barren landscapes, lack of local voices and perspectives, hollowed out domestic spaces, and repeated scenes of unjustified interruption by U.S. soldiers, all combine to justify the political and economic order that has come in the wake of U.S. occupation.

Conclusion

abroad resembles the way *Cops* has routinized police violence at home, overwhelmingly against Americans of color.

Released only a few months before the Coronavirus outbreak, The Afghanistan Papers have exposed the colossal failure of imperial policing and have raised pressing questions about the government's expenditure of trillions of dollars on its counter-terrorism wars. When taken together with the events of recent months, these Papers confirm that the United States—far from the indomitable imperial force represented in *American Sniper* and *12 Strong*—is in fact an imperial state in decline.

Not only has the United States failed in militarily combating terrorism, it also faces economic collapse. Four decades of neoliberal policies and practices have weakened its social infrastructure and undermined its capacity to respond to the current health and economic emergencies. Over the last two decades, even as state spending on the military and police has grown, domestic social spending—including on public health programs[32]—has been cut, disproportionately affecting poor and racially marginalized groups.[33] The large numbers of Coronavirus cases and deaths among Americans of color owes in part to these groups' longstanding lack of access to affordable healthcare. Moreover, as police violence against communities of color goes unchecked by the ruling establishment, white supremacist militia have become increasingly emboldened in publicizing their right to bear arms, thus contributing to a highly volatile political and economic atmosphere. If the rhetoric of war is being invoked in the present, this is in part to revert to the simplistic, racialized narrative of invading enemies and terrorists—and thereby evade discussion of the deep roots of the present crises.

The events of recent months prompt us to rethink and dismantle the false separation between home front and battlefield conveyed by political discourse as well as Hollywood. In this vein, Representative Barbara Lee has called for defunding the Pentagon budget. [34] Such calls—for defunding not just the police but also the military—need urgently to be attended, if we are to challenge a political-economic and cultural order that privileges war and policing at the expense of public health. In fact, when witnessing U.S. state violence directed against its own population in the midst of a pandemic, it is hard not to wonder what might have instead ensued had the trillions of dollars spent on the War on Terror been deployed towards funding national healthcare systems—both in the United States *and* in Iraq and Afghanistan, where U.S. wars and disaster capitalism have destroyed the infrastructures needed to address the health and economic emergencies of the present.[35]

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Notes

1. Caitlin Oprysko and Susannah Luthi, "Trump labels himself 'a wartime president' combating coronavirus." *Politico*, March 18, 2020: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/18/trump-administration-self-swab-coronavirus-tests-135590>;
Ishaan Tharoor, "Are we at 'war' with coronavirus?" *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2020: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/06/are-we-war-with-coronavirus/>; [return to page 1]
2. See, for instance, Joshua Keating, "The War on Terror Comes Home," *Slate.com*, June 3, 2020: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/06/war-on-terror-floyd-protests-military.html>
3. "U.S. Military Spending/Defense Budget 1960-2020." *Macrotrends.Net*: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/USA/united-states/military-spending-defense-budget>
4. Spenser Ackerman, "US police given billions from Homeland Security for 'tactical' equipment." *The Guardian*, Aug 20, 2014: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/20/police-billions-homeland-security-military-equipment>
5. Ignatieff used this phrase in a much-circulated piece published in the *New York Times* during the build-up to the Iraq War, when the term "empire" was being used unabashedly in association with the United States. Ignatieff argued that the US ought to take on the "burden" of functioning as an empire that protects democracy and is unafraid to use military force where necessary. "Virtuous disengagement," he claimed, "is no longer a possibility. Since Sept. 11, it has been about whether the republic can survive in safety at home without imperial policing abroad." Ignatieff thus mirrored the US government's justification for war by suggesting that 9/11 had left the country no option but to act as an "imperial police" in Iraq and in what he called the "frontier zone" of Afghanistan. Regime change in both places, Ignatieff suggested, was in the US's interest but also in the interest of the world at large. The British historian Niall Ferguson then echoed Ignatieff in a subsequent article and encouraged the United States to draw on the British empire as a model for maintaining "long term occupation" and for fashioning an "imperial elite" dedicated to such occupation.
6. David Himmelstein and Steffie Woolhandler, "Public Health's Failing Share of US Health Spending." *American Journal of Public Health* 2016 January; 106 (1): 56-57: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4695931/>
7. Brian Barrett, "The Pentagon's Hand-Me-Downs Helped Militarize Police. Here's How," *Wired*, June 2, 2020: <https://www.wired.com/story/pentagon-hand-me-downs-militarize-police-1033-program/>
8. Craig Whitlock, "At War with the Truth," *Washington Post*, Dec 9, 2019: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan->

9. For a review of academic responses to the broader genre of War on Terror cinema, see Toffoletti and Grace, and Froula.

10. The notion of imperial decline has been debated and discussed—including in mainstream US news publications— since at least the recession of 2008-09. For instance, in a December 2010 *Huffington Post* piece called “The Decline and Fall of the American Empire,” historian Alfred W. McCoy predicted, “Future historians are likely to identify the Bush administration’s rash invasion of Iraq in [2003] as the start of America’s downfall;” further, he proposed that this downfall was going to “come relatively quietly through invisible tendrils of economic collapse or cyberwarfare.” More recently, Donald Trump’s presidency has reignited a popular conversation about the fall of US Empire. See, for instance, Heer and Nguyen.

11. *In the Valley of Elah*—about a father (Tommy Lee Jones) looking for his missing veteran son— draws on tropes from the Western not to affirm but rather to critique, as Kollin puts it, the “reproduction of patriarchy and militarized masculinity across the generations, as well as the personal and social costs involved in sending sons to war” (154). As the father is forced to confront his own racism and anger, the film shows how, “savagery ... becomes located within the rescuers themselves, who are damaged by their violence, hatred, and desires for revenge” (Kollin 149). Similarly, *The Hurt Locker*’s narrative about US Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner) leading a team for dismantling improvised explosive devices in Iraq “unsettles divisions between savagery and civilization.” This unsettling happens in part owing to moments that sensitize the viewer to how ordinary, daily life in Baghdad has been interrupted by war. Through the film’s attentiveness to the violence of war experienced by ordinary Iraqis, Bigelow’s film “questions the logic of the Wild West analogy, asking whether the chaos of war and suffering of Iraqis is instead the result of the liberators themselves, the consequences of American cowboy diplomacy and the violence unleashed by the so-called ‘humanitarian warfare’ of western law-bringers in the region” (Kollin 163).

12. Hollywood has had a longstanding connection with the US military-industrial-complex, as evidenced in its war films. In this case, the CIA, Pentagon, and White House willingly collaborated with Hollywood, as if eager for the story of Bin Laden’s killing to re-frame public assessment of the War on Terror. For more on this particular collaboration, see Josh Gerstein. For more on the broader relationship between the US government and its film industry, see Westwell.

13. The film earned, within a few months of its release, over \$500 million from domestic and international sales, surpassing *Saving Private Ryan*, which was released in 1998, and “earned \$216.7 million in North America and \$481 million worldwide” (McClintock, “Box Office Milestone: ‘American Sniper’ Hits \$500M Globally, Becomes Top 2014 Title in U. S.”).

14. See Dana Stevens’ review for *Slate* magazine, which also captures the political controversy that the film generated.

15. Kyle’s memoir, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History* appeared on *The New York Times* bestseller list when it was published in 2012. The book’s success was crucial in popularizing the notion of Kyle as a “Legend.”

16. For more on Warner Brothers’ marketing strategy see McClintock, “‘American Sniper’: The Strategy Behind Warner Bros.’ \$107M Opening.”

17. Both Eastwood and Hall claimed that the film was pro-veteran and, effectively, anti-war (Dockterman, “Clint Eastwood Says *American Sniper* is Anti-War.”).

18. For examples of academic criticism of *American Sniper*, see Froula, Redmon, and Soberon.

19. There are as yet no scholarly analyses of *12 Strong*. For an exemplary film review of *12 Strong*, see Rizov. For an interview with Doug Stanton, on whose book the film is based, see Feldberg. Stanton describes *12 Strong* as a “western with lasers.”

20. *12 Strong* was filmed around Albuquerque, Socorro and Alamogordo (Gomez)—the landscape clearly reminiscent of the “Wild West” of Hollywood Westerns.

21. All the other service men to whom we are introduced also have wives who play traditional roles—cleaning the oven, or setting up a home. [[return to page 2](#)]

22. Kyle refers to Iraq as “dirt” at several moments. For instance, he questions his colleague, Marc, who has reservations about the war: “You want these motherfuckers to come to San Diego or New York? We’re protecting more than just this dirt.” Here Kyle implies that the purpose behind the war is not so much to protect Iraq, but rather to protect American spaces from being “soiled” by Iraqi “dirt.”

23. Soberon points this out in his analysis of *American Sniper*’s indebtedness to the Hollywood Western.

24. For more on the film’s treatment of trauma, see Redmon. He argues that director Clint Eastwood, in *American Sniper* as well as the subsequent release, *Sully* (2016), uses fiction film to perform—through narrative means—recovery from trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. My reading of trauma in this essay differs from Redmon’s: I am proposing that in its myopic focus on the cowboy-protagonist’s trauma, *American Sniper* ends up legitimizing and reinforcing this character’s racist view of Iraq and Iraqis.

25. Noah Berlatsky, “Defund the Police, Then Defund the Military,” *Foreign Policy*, June 15, 2020: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/15/defund-the-police-military-spending-militarization-black-lives-matter/> [[return to page 3](#)]

26. Cynthia McFadden, Christine Romo and Kenzi Abou-Sabe, “Why are many of America’s military families going hungry?” *NBC News*, July 12, 2019: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/why-are-many-america-s-military-families-going-hungry-n1028886>

27. Elizabeth King, “Why We Still Need a Movement to Keep Youth From Joining the Military.” *In These Times*, June 27, 2019: <https://inthesetimes.com/article/war-military-counter-recruitment-education-schools-youth>

28. This point was made by US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who recently sought to block federal funding for the military to recruit in public schools. See “Ocasio-Cortez takes aim at military recruitment in high schools,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2020.

29. Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, “Invisible Inequality: The Two Americas of Military Sacrifice” (August 15, 2016). 46 *Memphis L. Rev* 545 (2016), Minnesota Legal Studies Research Paper No. 16-43. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2823978

30. Rich Benjamin, “Not Just ‘Cops’: It’s Time to End the Entertainment

Industry's Anti-Black, Pro-Police Programming." *The Intercept*, June 20, 2020: <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/20/cops-tv-show-canceled/>

31. Henry Molofsky, "Cops: the violent legacy of a TV show that sculpted America's view of police." *The Guardian*, June 11, 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jun/11/cops-american-police-tv-show>

32. David Himmelstein and Steffie Woolhandler, "Public Health's Failing Share of US Health Spending." *American Journal of Public Health* 2016 January; 106 (1): 56-57: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4695931/>

33. As many have noted, the current pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on African Americans and people of color who, in addition to being "essential workers" exposed to the virus, also lack access to affordable healthcare as a result of longstanding racial discrimination.

34. Barbara Lee, "After Years of Wasted Spending, Congresswoman Lee Calls to Cut Pentagon Budget, Reprioritize Programs that Keep Us Safe." *Congresswoman Barbara Lee*, June 15, 2020: <https://lee.house.gov/news/press-releases/after-years-of-wasted-spending-congresswoman-lee-calls-to-cut-pentagon-budget-reprioritize-programs-that-keep-us-safe>

35. For effects of the pandemic in Afghanistan see: United Nations Development Programme, "Pandemic threatens Afghanistan's health system, economy, and peace process, UNDP study finds," June 18, 2020: https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2020/Pandemic_threatens_Afghanistan_health_system_economy_and_peace_process.html

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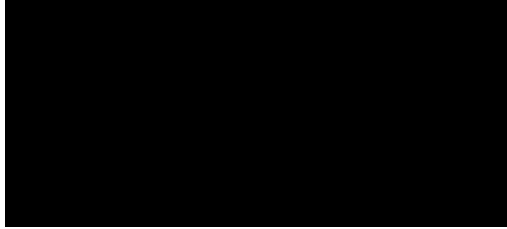
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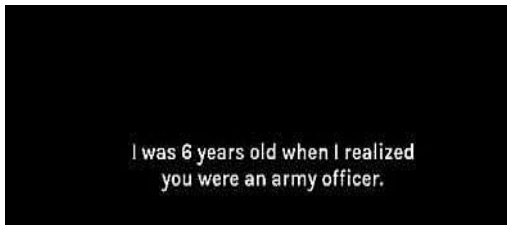
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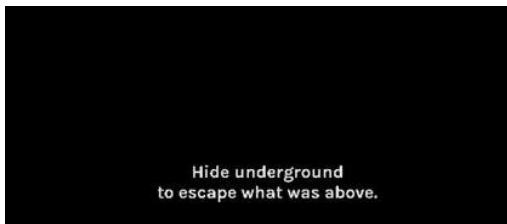
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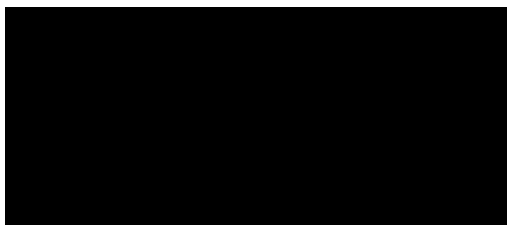
Panoptic opens with a 3-minute blacked-out screen, with indistinct sounds and noise in the background. This ploy attunes viewers to an intense experience of urban acoustic spheres.



"I was six years of age when I realized you were an army officer."



"Hide underground so as to escape what was above."



Immersive soundscapes: Rana Eid's *Panoptic*

by [Norman Saadi Nikro](#)

"I was scared of my dreams, while you believed in yours."
—Rana Eid, *Panoptic*.

I.

The first three minutes of *Panoptic* consist of a blacked-out screen, accompanied by acoustic vibrations and sonic frequencies. A murmuring, dumbing drone gradually increases in volume, as an intermittent, high-pitched, insect-like squeal renders the drone all the more dulling. Gradually, distant, somewhat hollow voices emerge from the soundscape, only to remain indistinct. Towards the end of this opening scene, the filmmaker, Rana Eid, voices the following:

"I was six years of age when I realized that you were an army officer. It was 1982, during the Israeli invasion. That's when I came to understand that there was a war, and that we had to go down into the shelter, to escape death. To hide underground to escape what was above."

After a short pause, she continues:

"That was the year I decided to close my eyes, and take refuge in sound."

The black screen subsequently dissolves into a broad, panoramic night shot of the traffic-congested highway straddling the Lebanese coast, leading into and out of Beirut. The flickering headlights of the cars are matched overhead by equally congested rows of fluorescent advertisements, promoting automobiles, fashion, fast-food, and various commercial enterprises. The colourful advertisements are surrounded by an impermeable darkness, rising up towards an infinite expanse of a formless mass of space.

No doubt designed to remind viewers that film is not only a visual experience, but indeed involves variations of sound, the blacked-out screen encourages a more intense experience of hearing and listening. Throughout the film, viewers are constrained to negotiate the difference between *sound* and *noise*—the latter, according to one prominent phenomenologist of sound,^[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) less readily identifiable than the former. It is interesting to observe that beyond their acoustic references, sound signifies rigor or thoroughness, while noise connotes clatter or racket. However, despite the seeming meaninglessness of background clatter, or more usually, hum or whirr, noise enfolds an embodied orientation to environment. The droning din of traffic below my apartment window, for example, is part and parcel of my embodied sense of place, part and

"That's when I decided to close my eyes and take refuge in sound."



Panoramic congestion of the highway straddling the Lebanese coast.

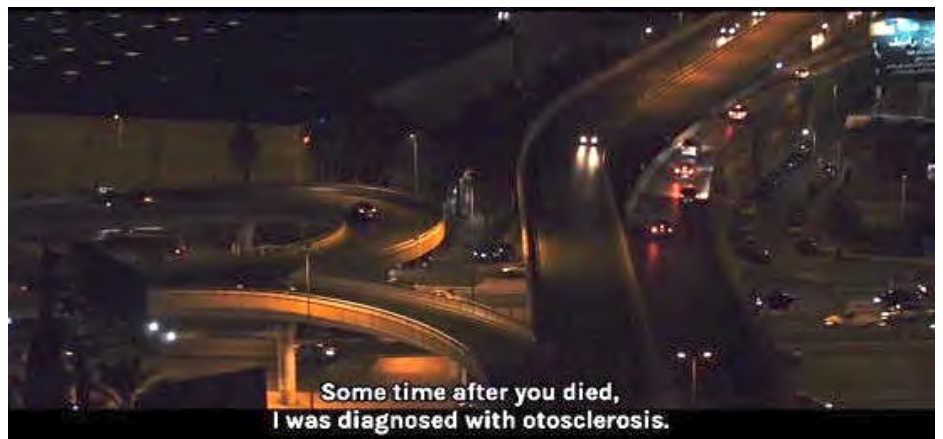
parcel of my capacity to inhabit my environment. This immersive dimension informs Eid's *Panoptic*.

In his thoughts on song, inspired by attending a performance by the Lebanese singer Yasmine Hamdan, John Berger writes:

"The tempo, the beat, the loops, the repetitions of a song offer a shelter from the flow of linear time—a shelter in which future, present, and past can console, provoke, ironize, and inspire one another." [2]

To some extent, in Eid's film the pulse beats of sound and noise serve to disrupt a clear distinction between past and present, which she creatively employs to render her memory of war and violence a cinematic modality of redress. Subjects of their environments, people embody varying capacities to distinguish between the sense of sound and the reverberating strains of noise. The indistinct entwinement of sound and noise, as well as past and present, informs the very style of *Panoptic*.

The opening scene serves to introduce the various interconnected themes running through the film. One of these is concentrated in the second-person "you," as Eid addresses her late father, who had been a high-ranking officer in the Lebanese army. The film is thus very personal, an autobioaural (to coin a term) exploration of Eid's childhood during the many bouts of armed violence and battles that have been historically lumped together and referred to in the singular as the Lebanese civil war, from 1975 to 1990.



Against a background of winding, arterial roads, the filmmaker Rana Eid addresses her deceased father, telling him that she was diagnosed with otosclerosis, for which she had an operation to save her from becoming deaf.

According to Lina Khatib, film production in Lebanon since 1990 has played a significant role in maintaining memories of the civil war, challenging the initial amnesia informing political and public cultures.[3] At the same time, she points out, the cinematic preoccupation with memories of violence disclose traumatic afflictions, encompassing what she calls a "national therapy," or else a "will to myth" to both symbolize and narrate memories of the civil war:

"Perhaps Lebanese films were used as an expression of this 'will to myth,' with the myth transforming from [sic] a nation in denial of the Civil War, to alleviate guilt, into a nation with a high degree of self reflection, a nation recognizing the necessity of healing, a nation full stop." [4]

While, in her film, Eid no doubt situates both her story and that of the country—or more specifically, of the city of Beirut[5]—as subjects of trauma, I'm not sure that *Panoptic* is designed to heal the nation. Eid's references to the nation, stylized through references to the Lebanese army, seem more ironic than symbolically

redemptive.

By the time *Panoptic* was released in 2017, documentary film in Lebanon had accrued an inventory of what the curator and film critic Rasha Salti has called “first person documentary.” Identifying a post-civil war experimental impulse in part with a loss of faith in political causes and ideological affiliations, she remarks:

“Through the bias of a single character’s story, the viewer is intimated to a world of unresolved paradox, ambivalence, and ambiguity.”[6]

To play on Salti’s terms of reference, we could say that for Eid there is no ambivalence about the ambiguities informing both the subject matter and the style of her film. Concerning style, the indistinct prism of sound and noise is paralleled by a camera lens that often doesn’t quite resolve into focus, along with a visual concentration on shadows, some of the human figures appearing as ghosts or phantoms. While topographical shots of winding roads and highways follow the opening blacked out screen, much of *Panoptic* is shot in underground rooms or prisons, dwelling in the internal penumbra of abandoned buildings, as well as long takes of immersion in water.



Eid compares the calcifying effects of otosclerosis to the city, trapping the inhabitants between above and below ground.

Eid’s reference to taking “refuge in sound” relates to her experience of underground bomb shelters during the civil war. This experience brought about a heightened aural awareness of an acoustic gulf between above and below ground, as well as an embodied tension between sound and noise. In her film, she attempts to recreate not so much an experience of moving between above and below ground—between, say, life in their apartment and the long hours of waiting in a bomb shelter—but rather the immersive soundscapes she (in her childhood self), along with many others, learned to inhabit as a condition of circumstance. Hence, Eid says in her voiceover: “At the end of the civil war we emerged from the shelters but not from the underground.” This could be read as emerging into sound but not quite from noise.

In *Panoptic* this non-emergence from the underground involves an intense embodiment of sound as something like an immersive chamber, amounting to a haptic experience of environment. Concerning film, Laura Marks has provided a compelling notion of the haptic as a provocation of sensory perception. According to her, “optical perception” and “haptic perception” complement each other to bring about a heightened sensory experience of film and other media.[7] Where the former, the optic, relies on symbolic relief and distinct outlines, the haptic concentrates on texture and detail, attentive to objects that have no direct role in the story, but that constitute an embodied sense of place and circumstance. Marks

writes:

“a haptic image asks memory to draw on other associations by refusing the visual plenitude of the optical image. In addition, because haptic images locate vision in the body, they make vision behave more like a contact sense, such as touch or smell.”[8]

In my discussion of Eid’s film I give more emphasis to the aural, rather than the optical. Both stylistically and thematically, *Panoptic* traces haptic experience as an embodiment of soundscapes. To my mind, if I am to stay in tune to Eid’s haptic approach to the circumstances, past and present, by which her memories transpire as a cinematic mode of address, it is important to keep in perspective how a body—the body of a film, the body of a filmmaker—*respires* as a hermeneutic vehicle of sensory perception.[9] The Arabic term *nafsiyya* captures perfectly this sense of respiration—*nafs*, breath—as an embodiment of hermeneutic capacities and orientations of self. It relates to personal taste and comportment, to self and psyche, to an embodied relationship to circumstance. Perhaps the term can also relate to Eid’s personal sense of “refuge,” although as I discuss in the next section, she extends her preoccupation with the underground to considerations of political culture in Lebanon.



Beirut, in the dim, steely light of morning. Sounds of whirring motors and car horns, “buzzing like a swarm of bees.”

II.

Eid’s intense interest in sound is certainly not a passing whim, but informs her considerable work in cinema in Lebanon. While *Panoptic* constitutes her directorial debut, since the turn of the century she has worked prodigiously as a sound engineer on films of established and emergent filmmakers. These include, to name only a few, Ghassan Salhab’s feature *The Mountain* (2010), Nadim Mishlawi’s *Sector Zero* (2011—exquisitely photographed by Talal Khoury, who did the camera work for *Panoptic*), Mai Masri’s feature *3000 Nights* (2015), and Mohamed Soueid’s *How Bitter My Sweet* (2008). Eid has degrees in cinema and film sound studies, and established *db Studios* in Beirut in 2006, specifically devoted to sound design in film.

Panoptic was released in August 2017, selected for the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland. Since then, Eid has screened her film at a number of festivals, including the Arab Film Festival in Berlin, in April 2019. A year earlier, in March 2018, *Panoptic* was due to be screened in Beirut, at the *Ayyam Al Cinema’iya* festival, when it was banned by the Directorate of General Security. Apparently, she was asked to cut some scenes and accompanying voiceovers, and while these were not that long, she nevertheless refused to accept the censorship. The Directorate, it seemed,[10] was sensitive about scenes of the underground Adlieh

Detention Centre in which hundreds of foreigners, mostly domestic workers, are imprisoned.



Directorate of General Security, Beirut.

Lebanon doesn't have a particularly good record of legislating for and protecting the rights of domestic workers—mostly women migrating from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia, arriving in Lebanon through the infamous *kafala* (visa sponsorship) system.[11] Government authorities and politicians are particularly sensitive to criticism. In respect to domestic workers in film, one of the more notorious acts of censorship concerned Randa Chahal Sabbag's feature of 1999, *Civilisées, A Civilised People*. At the time, Mohamed Soueid worked vigorously to have the film cleared for a public cinema release. But in the face of the General Security's demand for what amounted to a 40% cut of the film, he gave up. Ironically, the film was shown (and, as I recall, enthusiastically received) at the Beirut Film Festival in 1999 but ultimately banned from public release the year after.



Underground detention center for migrants, mostly women domestic workers who have lost their legal standing: "These people came here with dreams of a better life. Some regard them only as servants."

With the title of her film laced with heavy irony, the censors were no doubt uncomfortable with the confrontational style of Sabbag's approach, not only calling to account the somewhat heavy-handed, state-sponsored political culture of amnesia and "dismemory"[12] of the 1990s, but also the racism directed towards domestic workers. With its fragmented narrative style, *A Civilised People* employs surrealist-like juxtapositions to foreground the hypocrisy of the Lebanese, contrasting, for example, the brutality of random armed violence on the street to an elite woman moving between Beirut and Paris. According to one astute critic, Sabbag's film serves to confront the Lebanese with their failures to take responsibility for the civil war.[13]

As an early review of her films suggests, Sabbag often drew attention to conventional taboos, such as homosexuality.[14] Since she passed away in 2008, her films have gained further acclaim, with *A Civilised People* accruing something like a cult status. While this status is to some extent due to the heavy-handed censoring of the film, and otherwise to the musical score by the immensely creative and leftist provocateur Ziad Rahbani, it concerns more Sabbag's inimitable style, her creative use of the absurd to direct attention to the constitutive effects of moving image mediums. To my mind, Westmoreland's notion of "mediated subjectivity," as well as, more generally, the critical interest in "mediality,"[15] is useful to note how Sabbag directs a viewer's focus towards the constitutive role of the medium, rather than the content of representation. As Westmoreland has it,

"the historical record become[s] the site of experimental historiography. This does not imply a corrective or a mission of telling the actual 'truth' of political violence. Instead, it endeavors to disenchant viewers' expectations about how to understand history and reenchant them with a way of mourning the present." [16]

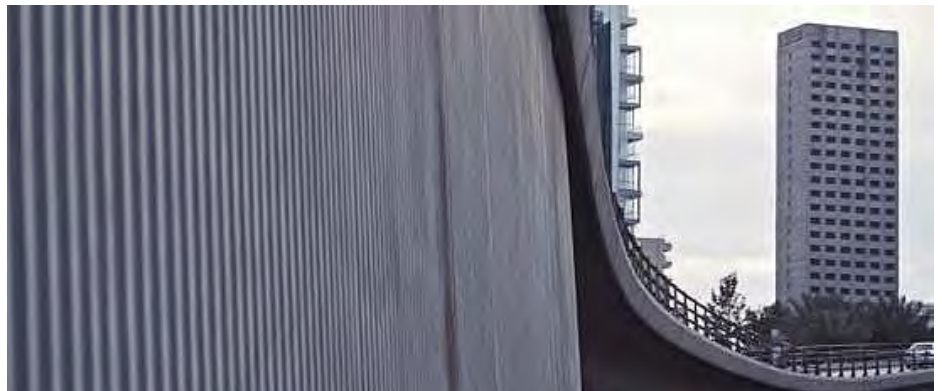
While to some extent *Panoptic* does exercise a "mourning of the present" (although, I am not sure that, in the contemporary rebellious climate in Lebanon, since at least the protests of 2016, "mourning" is the right term[17]), Eid's film is designed to disrupt conventional modes of understanding the recent history of Lebanon.

However, she is well aware that censorship is aimed at restricting—if not, on occasions, preventing—the capacity of film production to engage public awareness and discussion, especially concerning political violence. In the days following the ban, she took the somewhat unprecedented step of showing her film on Vimeo, making it available for viewers for three days. While the Vimeo screening helped to gain some exposure, it may not have drawn the type of public reception that Eid would have preferred. Like other reflective filmmakers in Lebanon, Eid's work is driven towards international festivals and their predominantly international patrons.[18]

III.

For many people in Lebanon, particularly those that had lived through the civil war in Beirut, Eid's studied, almost obsessive depiction of the infamous Burj el Murr—the tall, forty-storey block of concrete and metal named after the builder Michel el Murr—may well be almost harrowing. She has remarked that with its many windows like eyes, the building remains a site angst:

"I've always been very afraid of this building because a lot of people died there." [19]



Burj el Murr is a giant, never closing his eyes. Standing, like a vertical bridge, surveilling us."

The tower borders the hotel district of Beirut, straddling the Spears, Zokak al-Blaa, and Zarif neighbourhoods. Uniform in its streamline design, construction of the building began in 1974, on the eve of the outbreak of the civil war. As the violence halted its construction, the building became itself a site of violence, a hotspot for snipers, prison cells, and torture chambers. Consequently, the name Murr has been adapted as al-Mrara, or bitterness—the tower of bitterness.[20]

In Eid's film, the building first appears at around sixteen and a half minutes, in a distant camera shot foregrounding a curving, above ground road. From about five hundred metres away, the tower appears with straight sides, though ghostly in the dim twilight. In her voiceover, Eid says: "Burj el Murr is a giant. He doesn't close his eyes." Interestingly, this comes almost directly after another of her second-person voiceovers addressed to her father, spoken over one of the many shots of traffic along winding highways:

"When I was small, you'd wake me and my sister for school with military music. I'd open my eyes and you'd be in your uniform, ready. I thought you never slept, or else slept with your eyes open."

In her film, Eid situates and works on memories of her childhood sense of her father, her childhood sense of Beirut in the throes of inexplicable violence, as well as an aftermath in which the physical wounding of the city's buildings bears witness to an inadequately digested past. In the process, memory comes to trigger a number of associations, having implications for Eid's personal disposition, as well as that of Beirut.



"A one-hundred-eyed watchman." During the wars and violence that have come to be regarded, in the singular, as the civil war (1975-1990), the tower was a hotbed of snipers and torture chambers. It still stands, stubbornly occupying a central patch of turf.

The camera remains preoccupied with the Murr tower, "Standing, like a vertical bridge, he's surveilling us," Eid says. The camera cuts to a close up of the building, panning up from the ground, and then cutting to the interior, gliding through a number of half destroyed, dimly lit rooms. There are shots of debris, rubble, rubbish, all depicted by a patient camera that is all too happy to dwell on refuse and waste, against a haunting musical drone[21] accompanied by an equally haunting choir-like sonority. In one room a soldier dimly appears, wiping the sweat off his brow with a handkerchief. In another room, a soldier appears as a ghostly shadow on a wall.

These interior scenes go on for almost seven minutes, in the second half of which

Eid's voiceover returns, commenting on her childhood unease with her father's uniform. Addressing him again, she says that she has no recollection of him going down into the shelter, even during the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982.[22] She recounts a recurring dream she had in childhood, since 6 years of age, about a dragon in the shelter, "burning everything around it." In her fear she tries to hide, but the dragon catches sight of her and approaches, lying down next to her and "closing his eyes," sleeping. At the end of these somewhat claustrophobic scenes, the camera is back out on a street, focussed on a small boy, proudly holding a Lebanese flag, in front of a Lebanese army vehicle, being photographed by his excited mother.

Stylistically, in her film Eid employs both sound and sight to somehow mimic the layered textures of memories, which, like dreams, often seem as though they consist of random juxtapositions, whose significance remain inchoate, taking shape through their narration. In an interview with a local film critic, Eid discusses both her layered approach to sound and image, and her juxtapositional style:

"The sounds of the city itself occupies a large part of the film. I worked on the image as I worked on the sound: layers upon layers. Things that do not specifically match. My biggest challenge lies in the lack of any sound effects. All sounds are real, captured as they are, and I have not manipulated them." [23]

The lateral duality of above and below ground is rendered all the more eerie through the parallel of image and sound. One often feels that Talal Khoury's photography is attuned more to the aural layers, rather than the story. Especially inside the Murr tower, the camera casually roams over the vacant chambers, depicting not so much the different rooms, but rather the hollow and eerie atmosphere.

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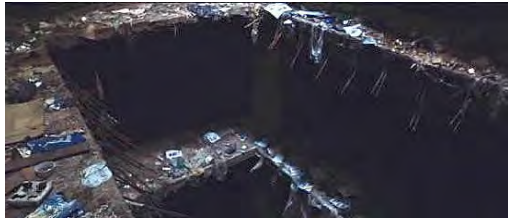
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Inside Burj el Murr, the camera glides through the gloom.



Semi-demolished rooms beset with waste and refuse. A soft, chiming chorus fills the soundscape.



Ghostly army figures in the shadows.



While the cinematographer, Talal Khoury, captures the visual atmosphere, Eid addresses the camera.

Panoptic encompasses a number of analogies between city and psyche, comparable to the analogy Freud makes between what he called “the ego” and “the Eternal City” in the opening pages of his *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1989, first published in German in 1930).^[24] [\[open endnotes in new page\]](#) In this late work, Freud returned to his fascination with memory and forgetting as psychosomatic processes. Written in Europe in the wake of the First World War, and consequently carrying a pessimistic aura, he employs the analogy of the city as a site of sedimented layers to claim that memory traces in the psyche are never destroyed, but remain “preserved,” and “in suitable circumstances...can once more be brought to light.” He alludes to a sense of “excavation,” and “archaeology.”^[25] I quote the longer passage:

“Since we overcame the error of supposing that the forgetting we are familiar with signified a destruction of the memory-trace—that is, its annihilation—we have been inclined to take the opposite view, that in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light.”

No doubt, for Freud, “brought to light” involves a number of complex processes. However, for my present purposes, it is important to note that what is “preserved” consists not only of certain incidents and events, but a person’s emotional response to incidents and events. Indeed, such responses take on a life of their own, played-out in a subject’s further relationships and life scenarios.

By the late 1920s, Freud had established a critical repertoire of the psyche in which memory-traces are processed as modalities of ego formation, whereby prohibitions are incorporated and socially exchanged as specific “accomplishments” (as Judith Butler says^[26]), specific traits of character. While he didn’t quite use the term *modalities*, what he was getting at was that mannerisms, ways of speaking, decorous conduct, public comportment, jokes and slips of the tongue, involve orientations to self and world, linguistic and cultural repertoires, histories of personal and social interaction, influencing capacities for self-constitution.

More locally, specifically concerning cinematic style, Eid has been influenced by the creative documentaries of Mohamed Soueid. In his films, such as the so-called civil war trilogy—*Tango of Yearning* (1998), *Nightfall* (2000), *Civil War* (2002)—he tends to depict personal idiosyncrasies in tandem to social quirks, demonstrating the pathologies incorporated by modalities of public decorum. In *Civil War*, for example, he focuses on the rising fashion of camouflage army fatigue, as well as the increasing rates of tooth decay among people in Lebanon. As Marks perceptively observes: “‘Subjects’ in Soueid’s films are knots of tics, bad habits, and accommodations that allow them to deal (not without flair) with impossible situations.” This phenomena has more to do with political culture than psychological disposition: “They are not so much psychological subjects as knots in a political field, their individual neuroses the manifestations of political traumas.”^[27]

Panoptic maintains the analogy of city and psyche. Early in the film, Eid observes that Beirut is petrified, as the city’s inhabitants have become “paralysed,”

again her father, wondering why his uniform was always so clean and tidy, even at the end of a long day.



Still in voiceover, Eid asks her father why he never joined them in the bomb shelter, even during the Israeli invasion of 1982.

incapable of rendering memory a more proactive undertaking of discussion. “With time,” she says, “the city itself calcified.” We learn that after her father’s death, Eid herself is diagnosed with otosclerosis, a middle-ear condition that gradually leads to a loss of hearing, and potentially, dementia. In her voiceover, she says that she had surgery to avoid becoming deaf.

This personal disposition is connected to thematic references to the city, Beirut, whose occupants, she observes, have lost their capacities to hear the acoustic pulse beats of a pathological condition. As Eid articulates further in her voiceover, still addressing a public hearing for interpolating:

“If I hadn’t done the operation, I might have gone deaf, and my head would have become calcified, paralysing me. But I wouldn’t die. With time, the city itself became calcified, trapping its inhabitants above and below the ground.”

In Soueid’s films and, as I am suggesting, *Panoptic*, neuroses are divided and shared through relational knots of personal comportment and political culture. For both filmmakers, political and social wounds are incorporated as afflictions, though directed towards a critical view of the pathologies of self and circumstance. By the same token, Soueid’s subjects—Bassem in *Nightfall*, the late Mohamed Doaybess in *Civil War*, and himself in *Tango of Yearning*—are eccentric to the extent that they fail to live up to predominant expectations of conduct, fail to conform to conventional mannerisms and demeanours. They are, in a sense, misfits, leftovers of a political culture compartmentalized into confessional allegiances (demographically and electorally), and otherwise informed by the symptomatic spasms of opportunistic forgetting. In *Panoptic*, the subject of neuroses is Eid’s own relationship to the history of violence and political culture in Lebanon, though sieved through her relationship to her late father, a former army general.

While introducing the Murr tower, Eid speaks about its resemblance to the mythological giant Argus Panopte, who apparently had a hundred eyes, half of which never closed, and whose job entailed keeping watch. To be sure, the film’s title, *Panoptic*, refers also to the work of the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, especially his notion of the subjective introjection of surveillance. Eid has mentioned the work of Foucault as a “main reference for her film.”[28] Foucault’s central point concerns circulations and distributions of power that produce docile subjects ever on their guard against their own potential transgressions. He adapts the idea of a lookout building, gleaned from Jeremy Bentham’s notion of a panoptic tower that functions as a mechanism for an introjection of surveillance.

If Freud’s outlook and conclusions in *Civilisation and its Discontents* are pessimistic, then Foucault’s are even gloomier. Power doesn’t take place between adversaries, but rather becomes a fateful modality of self-constitution. Indeed, for Foucault (at least in his *Discipline and Punish* period—mid 1970s) there seems to be no escape:

“He who is subjected to a *field of visibility*, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection (my emphasis).”[29]

For Eid, the point is that the Murr tower’s many windows appear like hollow eyes, and had the panoptic effect of subjecting people to a “field of visibility,” controlling how people comported themselves, internalizing fear and surveillance as a condition of livelihood during the long years of violence.



Back on the street, a woman takes a photo of her children in front of an army vehicle, one of the boys proudly holding aloft the Lebanese flag.



People expressing solidarity with the Lebanese army.

Her further point, which she draws attention to in her film, is that such subjective orientations and emotional modalities of comportment were not so much abnormal or extraordinary, but rather part and parcel of everyday life. Indeed, for many people during the civil war, what at times transpired as out of the ordinary were periods of relative calm, when basic services and goods became accessible for brief interludes. Such access implicates ways of comportment that were just as ordinary as they were extra-ordinary. As Sara Ahmed says, capacities to inhabit place implicate certain practices by which subjects “reach” out toward their circumstances, by which subjects are “shaped” by this relational orientation. Thus, capacities to meaningfully inhabit an environment and circumstance depend

“on the ways in which the world is available as a space of action, a space where things ‘have a certain place’ or are ‘in place.’ Bodies inhabit space by how they reach for objects, just as objects in turn extend what we can reach.”[30]

With its haunting depiction of the Murr tower, *Panoptic*, I want to emphasise, is designed to draw critical attention to the longevity of this haunting and its accompanying modes of comportment.

IV.

Where Foucault concentrated on the visual field, for Eid it is more a question of being subjected to spheres of acoustic and aural resonances. However, similar to Foucault’s productive notion of power, while telling the story of her relationship to sound, Eid draws attention to soundscapes as a dense materiality affecting the capacities of people to inhabit their environments. I have been suggesting that the trajectory of Eid’s personal and professional relationship to sound informs the pulse beats of her film, construed through a manifold entwinement of thematic reference, cinematic style, and personal disposition.



Throughout the film, with her many voiceovers addressing her deceased father, Eid tries to understand what motivated her father to become an army officer.

Her personal plight, composed as an aural address to her deceased father, is entangled with more general symptoms of public paralysis. This paralysis encompasses a psychosomatic disposition by which memories of violence—

concerning, in the main, the years of war and civil violence between 1975 and 1990—remain difficult to discuss as a public issue.

Since the civil war (as I mentioned in my opening remarks above), documentary in Lebanon has made a considerable contribution to memories of war and civil violence. For the most part, documentary has fashioned an experimental style marked by stuttering narratives of discomposure, characterisation betraying a fragmented sense of self. Having no trust in narrative continuity and temporal closure, filmmakers of Rana Eid's generation are nevertheless driven to gather shards of experience and fashion them into styles of cinematic production.

The fragmentary, episodic style constitutes a compelling interweaving of performative and referential modes of association, betraying a distrust of ideological explanations.



Blurred underwater scenes, with the sound of someone breathing heavily through an aqualung. They made me think of the Arabic term *nafs*, breath; *nafsiyya*, self, psyche—embodied orientations of self.



Submerged wreckage—a drone and indistinct voices.

Particularly after the Israeli occupation in 1982, violence between the various militias became increasingly opportunistic, shorn of any moral compass. In leftist circles (Arabist, Marxist, Maoist), as historical trust and hope lost their ideological moorings, cultural production became attuned to a shattered political landscape, in the midst of which the *nafsiyya* of characterisation transpires as a remnant or left-over of history. Like post-civil war literature in Lebanon, narrative style in film, especially documentary, became episodic, mesmerised by what we can refer to (to borrow a popular Arabic phrase when describing someone who has lost their wits) as a *fall into time*, by which I mean a loss of temporal moorings with which to look forward with modicums of confidence—capacities to simply *look forward*. In this next to final section of my essay, I want to discuss an intergenerational prism,[31] whereby for Eid's particular age group looking-forward became almost impossible.



Still underwater, in the background documentary footage of a machine gunner

during the civil war.

Like two other notable filmmakers in Lebanon, Nadine Naous and Eliane Raheb, [32] Eid is part of what can be called a civil war generation, whose childhood is entangled with the resonant, inexplicable force of war and armed violence—a resonance that was not so much abnormal, but indeed part and parcel of their surroundings. Their parents' generation had experienced the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s as a period of trust in political ideals. Across the Arab world it was a time of independence from colonial rulers and, to some extent, imperial influence. Pan-Arabism, Arab nationalism, and movements for Palestinian liberation promised social and political renewal, steered through progressive pulse beats of hope. I want to emphasise that this Nasserist[33] generation embodied political, social, and cultural hope as a hermeneutic modality of orienting oneself to the fractures brought about by the civil war years. In other words, for the Nasserist generation, the civil war could be hermeneutically digested as *a disappointment*, as *a failure* to live up to expectations of political and social hope.

By contrast, Eid, like Naous and Raheb, had no embodied sense of ideological trust or political hope. Consequently, their experience of civil war could not be made sense of in terms of political failure or disappointment. All three filmmakers were born in the early 1970s, and became aware of their world as one of actual and impending violence, or else intermittent periods of relative calm. In her film *Home Sweet Home* (2014), Naous refers to the formal end of the civil war in 1990-91 as “turning everything upside down.” Raheb has made similar remarks. In an interview in Cairo in 2013, where she was showing her film *Sleepless Nights* (2012) at the *Panorama European Film Festival*, she refers to the post-civil war period as one of inexplicable public silence.[34] She tells her interviewer, Hannah Dimashq, that the public silence and political amnesia motivated her to make her film, to reference war and violence as themes of public address. In this way Raheb could work on her sense of the meaninglessness of the immediate postwar period, as well as transform her embodied sense of actual and impending violence and non-violence into a hermeneutic of distinction between normal and abnormal.

At just under halfway into *Panoptic*, against a visual scene in Martyrs Square of national festivities and celebrations of the Lebanese army, Eid returns to her father:

“I dreamt of the dragon, while you dreamt of Pan-Arabism and Palestine. I was scared of my dream, while you believed in yours. But you’ve gone, and so have the dreams, and common causes, while the wars have multiplied, and we’ve lost sight of the enemy.”

To an accompanying sombre musical refrain, the hand-held camera moves forward through a narrow corridor of the inside of a building, as a news report announces an outbreak of militia clashes on the streets.

Remarkably, considering that *Panoptic* was released in 2017, the lack of political/public hope informing the film goes somewhat against the grain of the activist mood of anti-government sentiments and protests. In the second half of 2015 a large opposition movement emerged around the failure of the Lebanese government to adequately collect waste and otherwise provide basic services in an equitable and affordable manner. The current protests, initially sparked by the government’s decision to tax WhatsApp phone calls, emerged in October 2019, involving, in the main, a non-aligned youth intent on wresting their future livelihoods from the corrupt strangleholds of the political elite.

Against this contemporary background, while *Panoptic* may not share the future oriented spirit of these protest movements, the film does maintain the significance of more adequately dealing with the relation between personal and

public memories of the civil war.

The political elite I just referred to includes current political figures responsible for acts of violence during the civil war, who passed the General Amnesty Law in 1991, so as to spare themselves from incriminating redress and accountability. In her film, Eid refers to this amnesty as a watershed event bringing about amnesia. When asked, in an interview, about the tendency to repeat history because of a failure to critically discuss memories of violence, she responds:

“Of course. For me what the general amnesty did in 1991 to the country and how the Lebanese people accepted it is a general amnesia. We forgot everything. So that’s why I feel Lebanon is not going to be stable ever because we didn’t solve anything. That’s the Lebanese mentality, we put layers on top of other layers and we hide the reality. We hide everything and we put it underground and it’s been calcified.”[35]

The final image of the film reproduces the distant earlier image of the Murr building, shrouded in a sombre twilight, its stubborn immobility contrasted by the cars curving along the foregrounded highway, their lights becoming stronger as the light fades to near-black.



Beau Rivage Hotel—was occupied by the Syrian intelligence during the civil war: “In Beau Rivage I realized that when the civil war ended, we emerged from the shelters, but not from the underground.”

V.

Eid’s main achievement with her film concerns how she directs attention to the way in which sound is manifold, multilayered, and relational. While conventional fields of vision often involve outlines that serve to define distinct substances, which helps to compartmentalize people and things, separating them off from their interrelations, sound is much harder to contain, always overflowing attempts to box it in (a wall, for example, can serve to block off sight, whereby sound has a capacity to go through a wall).

In *Panoptic* no sound is singular or distinct, but interwoven with any number of sounds, echoing through underground chambers, or else reverberating as urban soundscapes, such as the opening scene when the noise of traffic is interwoven with hollow voices and insect-like screeches. Sound is interwoven with noise, its distinctness never quiet setting itself free from the immersive resonances of environments, both above and below ground. Refusing any compartmentalization of sound and noise, with her film Eid has managed to provide a compelling approach to soundscapes of cinematic style.



Final shot of the film: "Honor your dead through burial"

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Notes

1. Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. See especially chapter six, "The Auditory Field." [[return to text](#)]
2. John Berger, "Some Notes About Song (for Yasmine Hamdan)." In his *Confabulations*. London: Penguin, 2016, 96.
3. Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imaging the Civil War and Beyond*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008, 11, 58.
4. Ibid, xix.
5. Much of film and cinema in Lebanon tends to concentrate on the city of Beirut.
6. Rasha Salti, "When the National is Organic: The Very Short Story of Filmmaking, Being, and Subjectivity in Lebanon." www.goethe.de/ins/eg/prj/abs/leb/en5364547.htm Accessed May, 2010.
7. Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 12.
8. Ibid, 133.
9. On hermeneutic embodiment, see Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, especially chapter 1 "Breadcrumbs in the Forest."
10. Joseph Fahim, "A General's Daughter: Meet the Filmmaker Who Defied Lebanese Censors". *Middle East Eye*, April 24, 2018. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/generals-daughter-meet-filmmaker-who-defied-lebanese-censors>
11. For a discussion of the problem see, for example, Kirsten O'Regan's article, "A Day Out and a Union: Lebanon's Domestic Workers Organize". *Dissent*, Fall 2017, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/lebanon-domestic-workers-organize-union-kafala>
12. I developed this notion in an earlier work on memory and cultural production in Lebanon, adapting the term from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. See my *The Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge scholars, 2012.
13. Aseel Sawalha, "After Amnesia: Memory and War in Two Lebanese Films." *Visual Anthropology*, Vol 27, Nos 1-2, 2014, 105-116.
14. Olivia Snaije, "Film-maker still trying to find the right formula for Lebanese audiences and censors." *The Daily Star*, January 20, 2003. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=110166&mode=print>

15. On “mediality” and an accompanying notion of “gesture in its mediality,” see Jill Bennett, *Practical Aesthetics: Events, Affects and Art After 9/11*. London: I B Tauris, 2012, 120.
16. Mark Westmoreland, “Catastrophic Subjectivity: Representing Lebanon’s Undead”. *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*. Issue theme: Trauma and Memory. No 30, 2010, 182.
17. I’ll return to this theme in my conclusion.
18. It should be also observed that local NGOs, such as UMAM Documentation and Research and Zico House, hold in-house screenings of films that otherwise do not gain permission for public release. Such screenings often involve discussion sessions with the filmmakers. For a more considered discussion of film funding and viewing in Lebanon and the Arab countries more generally, see Laura Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015, especially chapter 1, “Cinematic Friendships: Intercessors, Collectives, Perturbations.”
19. Andreea Petru, “Breaking the Synchronicity: An Interview with Rana Eid.” *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 88, October 2017.
<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2018/feature-articles/breaking-the-synchronicity-an-interview-with-rana-eid/>
20. See Lina Ghaibeh’s twelve minute animation film of 2012—*Burj el Murr: Tower of Bitterness*. <https://vimeo.com/93245013>
21. Music for the film was composed by Nadim Mishlawi, who among his credits has worked on a number of the films of Mohamed Soueid.
22. To provide some historical context, 1982 was a particularly long year of war and violence. According to a report by the United States’ based International Center for Transitional Justice, during the second half of the year Israel’s siege and “indiscriminate blanket bombardment” of Beirut resulted in some 29,506 deaths, of which 80% were civilians. *Lebanon’s Legacy of Political Violence: A Mapping of Serious Violations of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law in Lebanon, 1975-2008*, 2013, 36.
https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Lebanon-Mapping-2013-EN_0.pdf
23. Nadim Jarjoura, “About Panoptic: Interview with Rana Eid”. *Mec Film*. July, 2017. https://mecfilm.de/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/filmhefte/en/Panoptic_engl.pdf
24. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981. [[return to page 2](#)]
25. Ibid, 16-17.
26. See her essay “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification”. In M. Berger et al (eds) *Constructing Masculinity*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
27. Laura U. Marks. “Mohamed Soueid’s Cinema of Immanence”. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. No. 49, Spring 2007. For more on Soueid’s trilogy, see my chapter “Between Mourning and Melancholia: Memory and Nurture in Mohamed Soueid’s Tango of Yearning”. In my *The Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012.
28. See endnote 19.

29. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995, 202-203.

30. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 109-110.

31. Intergenerational approaches to the civil war and its aftermath are only beginning to attract critical attention. In respect to literary production in Lebanon, see Syrine Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in The Diaspora*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, especially the introduction. See also chapter 2 of my *Milieus of ReMemory* (see note 31). Concerning art practitioners and interventionist archivists he calls “jeel al-harb” (war generation), see Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, 4.

32. Among their respective films, I mention Naous’s *Home Sweet Home* (2014), and Raheb’s *Sleepless Nights* (2012), two films I have previously written about. For the former, see “Ya ‘Ayb al-Shoum: Scenes of Auto/Bio/Graphy and Shame in Nadine Naous’s *Home Sweet Home*”. In *Life Writing*, Vol. 15. 211-226. For the latter, see chapter 4 of my *Milieus of ReMemory: Relationalities of Violence, Trauma, and Voice*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2019.

33. Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew the Egyptian monarchy in 1952, and embarked on a number of economic and social reforms. He became a figure head for a burgeoning sense of Arab pride and confidence, particularly after he nationalized the Suez Canal, which had been controlled by the British and French. I adapt his name here loosely to refer to the generation of Eid’d parents.

34. Interviewed by Hannah Dimashq on Cairo’s ONTV, December 2013.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1-Q8wIxBpI>

35. See endnote 19.



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Indigenous feminism revitalizing the long take: *Waru* and *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open*

by [Missy Molloy](#)



Waru (2017) is an Aotearoa New Zealand-set film comprised of eight 10-minute long takes, each written and directed by a Māori woman (the directors in shot order are Briar Grace-Smith, Casey Kaa, Ainsley Gardiner, Katie Wolfe, Renae Maihi, Chelsea Winstanley, Paula Jones and Awanui Simich-Pene). *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* (2019) is a "real-time" film co-written and directed by Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Kathleen Hepburn and presented as a single long take; the 13 long takes that constitute the bulk of the film are shot and edited to disguise the cuts. [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) *Waru* tracks the ripple effects of a child's abuse-related death on his community, while *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* focuses on Rosie (played by Violet Nelson), a pregnant teenager living with her abusive boyfriend, and Áila (played by Tailfeathers), a concerned stranger who witnesses Rosie's abuse, then urges her to seek help. While these films' long takes are technically proficient and innovative, I argue that their primary function is to develop themes about urgent social issues rather than to inspire marvel at their virtuosity. Thus in this essay, I use formal analysis of *Waru* and *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* to indicate the connections between the films' stylistic features and their representations of Indigenous women's experiences. Furthermore, my analysis of long takes in Indigenous films that originated in NZ and Canada highlights essential rather than incidental links between the two cinemas in anticipation of ambitious international co-productions helmed by Māori and First Nations women filmmakers on the horizon. [1a]

The two films analyzed here share several notable characteristics:

- they are primarily authored by Indigenous women;
- Indigenous women play the lead roles; and
- they effectively utilize long takes to communicate intersectional challenges Indigenous women face in the present.



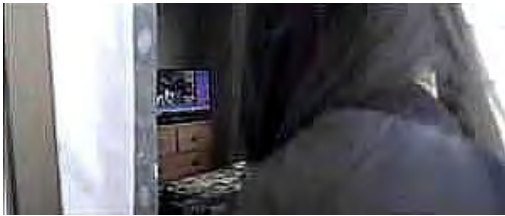
The particular use of long takes in these films serves to strengthen them as Indigenous feminist filmmaking. My close analysis of several lengthy takes from each film demonstrates the makers' revitalization of the long take, and adaptation of it in pursuit of analogous sociopolitical goals. And while these films recall aspects of cinematic realism historically associated with long takes, especially in regards to theories of feminist filmmaking that developed alongside second-wave feminism, these films also break new ground by meticulously orchestrating story, mise-en-scène and camera movement to situate viewers in close proximity to

realistically rendered experiences of contemporary Indigenous women. They do so in the service of a specifically twenty-first century Indigenous feminism that is currently gaining traction in indie, activist, and transnational spheres of film production.

The indirect and intimate long takes of *Waru's* “Mihi” and “Em”

Waru is an anthology film that producers Kerry Warkia and Kiel McNaughton developed with a plan to commission writer-directors to author eight long takes that tell distinct, yet related stories.[2] Embarking on the project in 2009, Warkia and McNaughton devised the film's inciting incident: “A child dies at the hands of a caregiver and during the tangihanga [te reo Māori for “funeral”] the wider whānau implodes.”[3] Whānau means “family” in te reo Māori, but the concept includes “extended family” and can also refer to a “community of related families who live together in the same area.”[4] The logline's “whānau” implies the latter, Warkia and McNaughton inviting Māori women applicants to propose characters and stories that would directly or indirectly involve the death of Waru (which means “eight” in te reo Māori). In theory, the indirect stories would testify to the strong impact of child abuse on the wider community.

An article about *Waru* published in New Zealand newspaper *Stuff* opens emphatically with “New Zealand has the worst rate of child abuse in the developed world.”[5] Warkia and McNaughton have stated that the intention behind *Waru's* premise was to “communicate the shared feelings we have towards child abuse in Aotearoa [te reo Māori for] New Zealand.”[6] After securing modest funding from the NZ Film Commission,[7] they invited proposals for the long takes that would become a single, collaborative feature. After accepting eight applicants, Warkia and McNaughton hosted a pre-production retreat for *Waru's* directors to develop their screenplays and enhance connections across the anthology.[8] The *Waru* project stipulated the following “non-negotiable” constraints: each shot



1. Several minutes into Shot 4, ‘Em,’ Waru appears on TV in the background of the image while Em desperately tries to break into her house where her baby has been left alone.

“[1] had to have a female Māori lead, [2] the story had to connect to the death of a child, [3] all the stories had to take place within the same 10-minute timeframe, and [4] the vignette would be one continuous shot.”[9]

In *Waru's* final cut, the following features enhance connections between the eight shots:



2: The title ‘MIHI 09:59 am’ appears bottom-left of the image at the start of *Waru*:Shot 3, Mihi initially framed from behind in medium close-up.

- Waru's voiceover narration, “When I died, I saw the whole world,” opens the film and replays in the final shot;
- the same press photo of Waru (with and without the accompanying news broadcast) appears in several takes (Figure 1);
- the same non-diegetic titles—9:59 am, quickly replaced by 10:00 am (same font, same on-screen placement, see Figures 2 and 3)—open each shot, signaling a new sequence and communicating that all eight shots are diegetically simultaneous;
- the film's score maintains a subtle presence that augments tonal similarities among the shots;
- Drew Sturge is the director of photography, Rajneel Singh the editor, and Riria Lee the production designer for all eight long takes[10]; and
- several actors appear in multiple segments (for example, Waru's distraught mother appears in Shots 1 and 5).

Upon release, critics praised the originality of *Waru's* concept and execution[11]; the fresh perspectives it presented on the difficult subject matter of NZ's high



3: The title ‘EM 10:00 am’ appears immediately after ‘EM 09:00 am’ at the beginning of *Waru*: Shot 4, Em initially visible in profile in the foreground of the image.



4: The angle of Shot 3: ‘Mihi,’ is canted at the start, the sound of an engine failing to catch and a woman cursing in frustration audible as the camera reframes to a straight angle, Mihi eventually coming into view at the right of the image.



child homicide and abuse rates[12]; and the creativity stimulated by the constraints, in particular the long take specification.[13]

My analysis concentrates on Shots 3, “Mihi,” and 4, “Em,” which, of *Waru*’s eight shots, focus most explicitly on motherhood and represent, in my view, the most sophisticated responses to the film’s constraints. Directors Ainsley Gardiner (“Mihi”) and Katie Wolfe (“Em”) were among the most experienced in film production at the start of the project (other *Waru* directors entered pre-production with experience mainly in screenwriting, producing, and/or theater [14]). Gardiner has produced several of the most successful twenty-first century NZ films, including *Boy* (Waititi 2010) and *The Breaker Upperers* (Sami and van Beek 2018), and prior to “Mihi,” had written and directed an award-winning short, “Mokopuna” (2009), that screened at 16 international festivals. Her professional biography (available on *NZ On Screen*’s website) indicates that Indigenous feminism fuels her film practice: Gardiner “[seeks] stories by two groups who have often battled to be heard on-screen: Māori and women.”[15] *Waru* offered Gardiner the opportunity to combine the two, and to stretch her directing capabilities by meeting the constraints:

“I was reluctant to be involved at first, I felt aggrieved that we were bringing these amazing wahine—or female—Māori filmmakers together and a story of abuse was the one we were going to tell. But I decided to do it to develop my directing skills—I am more often a producer than a director—and I liked the idea of working within constraints that were not of my making.”[16]

The title character “Mihi” is out of gas at the start of the sequence (Figure 4). After having difficulty connecting to the school office to report her children absent (“My kids, they’re sick,” she declares tersely after the answering machine finally beeps), she exits her car, carrying the baby seat in which her youngest child sleeps, and approaches the front door. On her way into the house, she dials “Work and Income” (NZ’s social services department) to request help accessing fuel (Figure 5).

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| <p>5: The camera precedes Mihi into the house, pausing to frame her in a long shot while she calls ‘Work and Income.’ The vertical lines of the composition box her into the center of the frame. ‘My car, I need gas,’ she states impatiently before realizing that she’s talking to a recording.</p> | <p>6: Still on hold, Mihi roots around for change in the kitchen drawers. The kitchen’s low-key, low contrast image quality and the muted colors of the production design depict a realistically lived-in domestic space.</p> |
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| 7: The camera hovers in the kitchen while Mihi (now framed in a medium shot) scrounges beneath the couch cushions, not finding much change but discovering an overlooked school trip permission slip. | 8: Later in the take, Mihi is compelled to search under the refrigerator, her two young daughters appearing behind her in matching red and pink tops and becoming momentarily caught up in the search. |



9: When Mihi's daughters ask for something to eat, she gives them first two slices of white bread, then a can of corn. Despite the closeness of Mihi's midsection to the camera, the can of corn in the foreground and her daughter's watchful gaze in the background are the focus of this composition.

In the next (and lengthiest) segment of the 10-minute shot, Mihi is on hold with Work and Income, the service's muzak providing a diegetic score that accompanies her frantic search for spare change: in the kitchen drawers (Figure 6), under the couch cushions in the semi-connected living room (Figure 7), and eventually, under the refrigerator (Figure 8).

Mihi's two hungry young daughters interrupt her rummage through the kitchen drawers; their request for "something to eat" motivates another harried search, this time in the kitchen cabinets. She gives them each a plain slice of white bread, but they aren't satisfied, so she opens a can of corn and hands it to them (Figure 9). While still on hold and scrounging under the sofa cushions, Mihi finds a school permission slip, which obviously upsets her. Appearing semi-defeated, she stares out the window (Figure 10), the camera refocusing to register her sudden awareness that her neighbor is watching (Figure 11).

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| 10: Mihi's gaze out the window enhances the depth of the image, the exterior light attracting attention to the center of the image, where Mihi's neighbor is out of focus in the background. | 11: The deepest plane of the image comes suddenly into focus when Mihi becomes aware of her neighbor watching her through the window. |



12: The last drop of milk is one disappointment too many; the camera maintains a slightly greater distance from Mihi to frame her defeated expression and posture in a medium shot (and in profile).

“Keep your bloody nose out of it,” she angrily mutters, retreating away from the window and back into the kitchen, then becoming even more discouraged when she pours the last drop of milk into her coffee (Figure 12). Now totally overcome, Mihi slides down the wall (Figure 13) and lies on the floor (Figure 14). Her vantage (from the floor) compels an under-the-refrigerator search, but the small change that produces only intensifies her despair.



13: The camera tracks in on Mihi when she moves to the wall and slides down to the floor, her overwhelmed expression blending into the neutral colors surrounding her.



14: The previous placement of Mihi in the left side of the frame foreshadows her movement to balance the composition. From this angle, Mihi can see under the refrigerator.



15: Harmony’s arrival introduces a new layer of tension into the sequence. Her blue sweater contrasts with the neutral browns, beiges and whites that have dominated the mise-en-scène to this point. During their altercation, racking focus, subtle camera movements, and staging depict a conversational exchange of the variety that would commonly be edited as a S/CS pattern.

The entrance of her adolescent daughter, Harmony, through the back door and appearing dejected, kicks off the long take’s third (and final) act. They have an altercation, during which Mihi’s call becomes disconnected (and she loses her place in the hold line). Harmony is angry at Mihi for failing to sign the school permission slip for a Museum trip scheduled that day and for failing to pay her fees (Figure 15, “I couldn’t go [on the trip] anyway,” Harmony mutters). On the other hand, Mihi is angry at the school for sending students who can’t pay for the trip home and at Harmony for her disrespect. “You’re not the mom,” Mihi angrily reminds her (Figure 16), a statement Harmony throws back in her face a minute later (Figure 17) after Mihi demands that Harmony go pick up the baby, his crying audible from another room (off-screen).



16: At several points during the argument, the focus racks, selecting either Harmony or Mihi for special attention. Harmony’s dismissive attitude towards Mihi incenses her, as evident in this expression.
17: ‘I’m not the mum,’ Harmony retorts, echoing Mihi’s previous statement. The camera has tracked Harmony’s retreat from Mihi, the latter’s ‘don’t you fucking walk away from me’.....



.... audible from slightly off-screen. The camera pauses between the two, panning to focus on one, then the other. Harmony’s placement mirrors that of Mihi early in the sequence, inspiring comparison of the two that the dialogue’s emphasis on maternity enhances. Maternal struggles are cyclical and inherited, this compositional symmetry suggests.

The long take climaxes when the enraged Mihi grabs Harmony by the shoulders and slams her roughly against the hallway wall near the open front door (Figure 18). At that precise moment, the “nosy” neighbor appears behind them in the doorway, surprising Mihi with offers of fuel (from her lawnmower), food (proffering a plastic grocery bag, Figure 19), and help with the baby.



18: Harmony's 'I'm not the mum' inspires Mihi's movement into the frame, where she assumes Harmony's position in the doorway, grabs her roughly by the shoulders, and pushes her against the wall.



19: The neighbor's unexpected arrival changes the dynamics of the encounter and the image composition; the neighbor assumes the central position in the image, with Mihi's attention drawn to her and Harmony's remaining on Mihi.

The neighbor's unexpected arrival (and help) deflates the violent emotions she interrupted; Mihi lets her into the house to get the screaming baby, hands Harmony food from the bag, and gently (albeit wearily) directs her outside to play with her sisters. The camera subsequently follows Harmony outside and becomes unmoored (apparently magically, the technique accomplished with grace, Figure 20). Mihi is visible leaning in the doorway, observing her children (Figure 21), while the camera floats upward, leaving Mihi in the distance (Figure 22) and eventually off-screen. The take ends with an image of the sky above the houses and tree-line (Figure 23).



20: Harmony exits the house to join her younger sisters in the front yard. The camera follows, then diverges, suddenly taking flight.



21: The camera drifts back and up from Mihi, her children, their home and front yard. Mihi watches the girls play, leaning in the doorway and framed in a long shot.



22: Mihi and her children are visible in extreme long shot as the camera continues its drift skyward. The younger girl's light red cape complements a new rust-red color pattern.



23: 'Mihi' concludes with the camera drifting above the tree-line and into the pure blue of the sky.

Waru's third vignette effectively communicates that for Mihi, motherhood is a compound of frustration, unceasing demands, disappointment, and exhaustion, which Gardiner expresses by showing that while Mihi is always moving (and rarely still), she is hindered from accomplishing most of her goals because new challenges distract her, often exacerbating existing problems. So for example, while searching for spare change to purchase fuel, which she needs to drive her younger children to school, Mihi finds a permission slip that she had forgotten. When Harmony's arrival intensifies *that* problem, a fight develops between Mihi and Harmony that terminates the "Work and Income" call, thus impeding a solution to the fuel problem through the enhancement of another, unsolvable problem. Gardiner explains that her own experiences informed Mihi's story:



24: This superimposed sketch paired with the sound effect of a dragon lightly growling conveys Mihi's subjective point-of-view (which the camera's pan left supports): Mihi feels judged by her neighbor.



25: Mihi's spontaneous reference to a dragon (after perceiving her neighbor's intense gaze as a threat) inspires her young daughters to imagine utilizing superpowers to fight the dragon. Their red and pink clothing contrasts the neutral colors of the interior production design and Mihi's clothes.



26: The brief appearance of an animated dragon's tail darting out from under the refrigerator resembles a pulsing arrow beckoning Mihi, who hopefully pursues.

"I have spent years on the DPB [NZ's Domestic Purposes Benefit, which mainly serves solo parents], where my whole spirit was broken. I was demoralised, my way of seeing the world altered. And while I was lucky enough to have a middle-class education and knew that despite my misery I was not a lost cause, while I had my imagination and storytelling that allowed me to retain hope, and though I was surrounded by friends and family, I felt very alone in my struggle." [17]

The story Gardiner tells in *Waru's* third take draws attention to Mihi's formidable challenges, which appear perpetual, and to small acts of kindness, which can be decisive for people ground down by a daily fight to survive and by societal contempt for those on benefits.

Gardiner's emphasis on "imagination and storytelling," in her comment about the film's inspiration, is evident in a fantastic element that enhances the narrative complexity of the sequence (which would have been an accomplished long take in the style of neorealism without this element). It involves a dragon, which Mihi evokes through sound effects, animation superimposed onto the live action footage, and dialogue. In the first dragon reference (early in the take), Mihi notices her neighbor while exiting the car, and when the camera pans left to approximate a point-of-view shot from Mihi's perspective, the sound of a lightly audible dragon's growl complements the childlike sketch of dragon's breathe emitting from her neighbor's nose (Figure 24).

Shortly after, Mihi tells her two young daughters that their school is closed because it "got attacked by dragons" (rather than admit that they can't go because the car is out of fuel). Later, while Mihi is on hold and desperately searching for change, it becomes clear that her daughters have integrated the dragon tale into their play (Figure 25). "Shh! You're gonna wake your brother," Mihi chastises. "We're chasing the dragon," they exclaim, one costumed in a red cape and both wielding stick/swords. "I'm using mind control," the older girl brags. "What's your superpower, Mom?" "Invincibility. I'm invincible," Mihi answers. "Invincible?" asks the younger in confusion. In response, the older misinforms her: "It means no one can see her."

Several minutes later, when Mihi is sprawled on the kitchen floor in defeat, a second animation, of a dragon's tail shooting out from under the refrigerator before quickly retracting (and also accompanied by the faint dragon sound effect) compels Mihi to pursue it (Figure 26). However, that search also ends in disappointment, which the hold line's muzak amplifies along with the sporadic interruption, "Someone will be with you soon. Please hold" (delivered in an emotionless computer-generated voice). The invincibility/invisibility mix up resonates here, when Mihi's imagination fails her, and later, during Harmony and Mihi's altercation when Mihi pursues Harmony into the hallway, pleading, "Can you even hear me? . . . Stop ignoring me!" (Figure 27).

The element of fantasy that the dragon injects into "Mihi" creatively conveys Gardiner's belief about the value of imagination, which was pivotal in the challenges she faced while on benefits. It also communicates that imagination alone cannot protect the socially vulnerable from feeling invisible. Furthermore, invincibility requires more than imagination, "Mihi" carefully suggests. It requires social support that legitimately *feels* supportive rather than isolating and judgmental (Gardiner having described her own years on the DPB as spirit-breaking).

Gardiner's careful staging of Mihi, a mother struggling to make ends meet, in her home and via long takes is reminiscent of Chantal Akerman's groundbreaking 1975 feature film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. R.



27. Mihi declares herself invincible, railing against her treatment as invisible by others, including her adolescent daughter, Harmony.



28: In a rare occurrence, the camera neglects to follow Mihi, and she exits frame left. The camera tracks slowly right instead, allowing viewers to note the small pile of change collected on the counter before it pauses in the doorway. From there, Mihi is visible in the living room.

Patrick Kinsman's article on *Jeanne Dielman*, "She's Come Undone," [18] states,

"One of the most immediately noticeable characteristics of the film is its reliance on cinematic minimalism, manifested as long takes and medium shots. Jeanne (Delphine Seyrig) is almost always in the frame, but wanders in and out" (218).

Replace "Jeanne (Delphine Seyrig)" with "Mihi (Ngapaki Moetara)" and the statement applies to *Waru*'s third take, although the camera increases its distance from Mihi at several noteworthy points in the 10-minute sequence. Also like *Jeanne Dielman*, "Mihi" has formal properties that prioritize its main character's domestic labor, closely attending to the gestures and expressions that communicate her experience. Teresa de Lauretis argues that in *Jeanne Dielman*,

"narrative suspense is not built on the expectation of a 'significant event,' a socially momentous act . . . but is produced by the tiny slips in Jeanne's routine, the small forgettings, the hesitations between real-time gestures as common and 'insignificant' as peeling potatoes, washing dishes or making coffee – and then not drinking it" (159). [19]

Jeanne and Mihi are constantly in action, yet their actions display the discontinuities and disruptions of a distinctly maternal subjectivity, and their stories challenge conventional notions of significant events and suspense in cinematic storytelling (as de Lauretis implies through scare quotes).

While the hint of fantasy adds depth to the portrait of Mihi's subjectivity, the movement of the camera independently of Mihi says something about *Waru*, Shot 3's perspective on the social problem of child abuse in NZ. For the majority of the sequence, the camera remains close to Mihi, framing her in medium and/or medium close-up, which enhances the conspicuousness of its independent movements. For instance, it lingers on the small pile of change on the counter after Mihi exits frame left, tracking in and slightly right to capture Mihi in the living room (Figure 28), or it tracks Harmony's angry retreat from Mihi. Yet the most noteworthy camera movement away from Mihi is the final retreat from the house and into the sky. The *Waru* score becomes audible in this finale, signaling the sequence's imminent end and enhancing the drama of its conclusion.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The 1 minute, 40 seconds of score that plays until “Mihi” cuts to black is available here: <https://soundcloud.com/laurenkingproductions/waru-mihi-neighbourly-deed?in=laurenkingproductions/sets/waru-original-soundtrack-score>. The emotional electronic composition (by Lauren King) gradually fades in at the background of the sequence’s turning point, when Mihi’s neighbor offers much needed assistance (thereby overturning Mihi’s interpretation of her interest as judgmental).

The *Waru* score and sky imagery correspond with aspects of *Waru*’s opening and closing, thereby connecting Shot 3’s conclusion to the position on domestic violence advanced by the anthology as a whole. Just after the *Waru* title card and before the opening of Shot 1: “Charm,” Waru states via voiceover narration, “When I died, I saw the whole world.” Waru repeats the line at the start of the final sequence, Shot 8: “Titty and Bash,” this time with additional text, including, “I see the people in their houses . . . *When I died, I was flying*” (this line whispered). This line resonates with Mihi’s finale, connecting the score’s presence and camera’s drift upward, away from Mihi’s troubles and into an aerial view, with Waru, the child victim of domestic abuse. In “Titty and Bash,” which ends with two sisters interrupting a scene of domestic violence to liberate their young whānau, Waru whispers, “*I see the people.*” I read this line as reassurance that even if Mihi and the other *Waru* protagonists feel invisible, they are nonetheless seen; a non-judgmental and compassionate gaze encompasses and connects their struggling community. According to *Waru*’s complex ethical vision, victims of domestic violence, like Waru, and those dangerously on the edge of enacting such violence, like Mihi and Em, are empathically linked.

Thus while “Mihi” and “Em” are feminist in the compassion towards socially disadvantaged mothers that they model and in their endorsement of efforts to understand rather than demonize them, Gardiner and Wolfe advocate specifically for Māori women, insisting that these mothers suffer from systemic racism in addition to sexism. *Waru*’s most explicit confrontation with systemic racism occurs in Shot 6, “Kiritapu,” which features a Māori woman working in the media who is isolated from her Pākehā[20] colleagues and subjected to constant demands to explain the overrepresentation of Māori in child abuse cases. In the most dramatic instance of workplace racism depicted in the sequence, a female colleague casually poses the rhetorical question, “Hey Kiri, why do Māori keep having babies if they just kill them, I mean, what the fuck?” The silently seething Kiri erupts in the shot’s finale during a live broadcast, proclaiming that child abuse in New Zealand is “everyone’s problem,” not Māori’s alone (Figure 29). In fact, *Waru* precisely pinpoints social isolation and condemnation as principal causes of tragedies like Waru’s death.

Cheryl Suzack describes Indigenous feminism as follows:

“It focuses on the intersections between colonialism and patriarchy to examine how race and gender systems overlap to create conditions in which Indigenous women are subjected to forms of social disempowerment that arise out of historical and contemporary practices of colonialism, racism, sexism, and patriarchy leading to social patterns of ‘discrimination within discrimination’ (Kirkness, 1987–1988, p. 13) that disproportionately affect Indigenous women” (261).[21] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



29: *Waru*: Shot 6, ‘Kiritapu,’ takes a broad, NZ-wide view of systemic racism and its implication in child abuse. In the sequence finale, protagonist Kiri rebelliously declares on live broadcast that Waru’s tragic death is everyone’s problem, the whole nation’s, and should not be mistakenly attributed to Māori.

In an interview with *Women and Hollywood*, Gardiner explained the response she hoped “Mihi” would incite in viewers:

“It was important to me to ask people to be honest about their own struggles as a way to understand the issues surrounding child abuse more compassionately. I wanted them to identify with Mihi (played by Ngapaki Moetara) and understand how we are only ever on a knife edge with our own humanity: the ability to make really bad choices is within all of us. Then imagine if you’ve never been taught how to make good choices, or you’re stuck in a cycle of poverty, or abuse, or generations of abuse, or loss of culture — [imagination is] the beginning of understanding, I think. And it’s where the conversation about child abuse needs to start. First with comprehension and understanding, then with compassion, then with solutions.”[22]

Waru’s imaginative and collaborative framework allows for a range of portraits that illustrate the intersectional challenges disadvantaging contemporary Māori women, with particular attention placed on the co-productive dynamic between systemic poverty, addiction and abuse.

The aims Gardiner articulates are relevant to the entire anthology yet resonate most strikingly with “Em,” placed directly after “Mihi” in the series of long takes. Deborah Young’s review suggests thematic overlaps between the two sequential sequences:

“Ainsely Gardiner’s [is a] wrenching account of a single mother [Mihi] who hasn’t enough money to buy gas for her car or food for her kids. A complementary piece on motherhood is Katie Wolfe’s about a hip young singer [Em] who comes home at dawn, falling down drunk, and discovers her baby has been locked in the house, alone.”[23]

Prior to directing “Em,” Wolfe had worked steadily in film and television since the early 1990s, and had directed two award-winning shorts, *This is Her* (2008) and *Redemption* (2010), both of which screened at Sundance Film Festival (among many others) and the latter won an imagineNATIVE jury prize.[24] Wolfe found the long take constraint stimulating, and was the only *Waru* director who approached the long take as a lengthy, near-silent action shot.



30. The first glimpse of Em shows her in the passenger seat of a packed car. In the final stage of a long night out, the passengers sing along to the radio with enthusiasm. Em is in the foreground of the shot, just right of the center line.

“For me, the writing process was dictated by the one-shot, I don’t think everyone worked that way . . . I remember the feeling of adrenalin before each take –there was so much set up and so much that could go wrong.”[25]

At the start of Shot 4, Em is about to be dropped home in the morning after a night out. The car-full of young people she is in exuberantly sing, and a comment from the driver to Em (seated in the passenger seat) refers to her participation in a successful performance. Em, extremely intoxicated, sings along loudly to the radio (Figure 30), though she sobers up slightly when they arrive at her house, where she strongly discourages the driver from pulling into the driveway. She also rejects his offer of help when she struggles to exit the car (Figure 31). After the car pulls away – Em yelling, “I love you, fellas,” slurring her words – a difficult journey up the driveway to the front porch ensues.

For nearly a minute of screen time, Em staggers, falls (Figure 32), and eventually



31: Em struggles first with her seatbelt, then with the door. When the driver offers his help getting to the house, Em unconvincingly mumbles, 'I'm fine,' slurring her speech and hanging onto the car window for balance. Em's black hair, black coat, and the image composition paint nearly half the frame black.

drags herself onto the front porch. Then, a dramatic shift occurs when she realizes that she is locked out of the house (Figure 33) and her baby is inside alone.



32. Unsteady, Em props herself against the fence to drag her body towards the house, but she falls, ending up face down on the grass clutching the beer bottle she had taken 'for the road.' This is the first of Em's three major falls in the sequence (although she stumbles consistently throughout, she falls flat on only three occasions).



33: Em frantically tests door and window locks, the camera tracking her efforts and keeping her framed in medium-long, medium, and medium close-up. The sequence consistently emphasizes a hard boundary between inside and outside the house, with many compositions featuring glass to demonstrate that transparency doesn't equal access.

These sobering facts gain her some clarity, and she spends the next several minutes desperately trying to get into the house: banging on windows (Figure 34) and checking locks; unsteadily climbing a ladder to reach a window and falling; pulling a sharp branch out of her leg after the fall (Figure 35), then hobbling towards the back porch; and frantically upending (one by one) a massive pile of shoes (Figure 36) in search of the spare key. When she finds it, she lets out a triumphant gasp before eagerly unlocking the back door (Figure 37).



34: In one of only several close-up framings of Em, she climbs a ladder and still strains to see into the window. Her head takes up only a small fraction of the image, the rest dominated by the window's hazy reflection. From here, she falls out of frame with a clatter.



35. After hitting the ground hard, Em struggles to a seat before steeling herself to remove the stick now painfully lodged in her leg. During the 10-minute take, Em is constantly in action except when momentarily incapacitated, as after this fall, and her expressions convey an impressive range of intense feelings (agony, in this instance). The mise-en-scène establishes a chaotic domestic environment, inside and outside the house.



36: Multiple piles of shoes dominate the production design of the back porch. These



37: The camera closes in on Em as she clumsily inserts the key. The darkness of

augment the drama of Em's strenuous efforts to gain entrance to the house. She is a dark blur of activity at the center of this image .

her hair and jacket blends into the door in this image, creating a split composition of light and dark.

During Em's exterior search for a way into the house, Waru is visible through a window on a news broadcast (Figure 1). Em also passes the smoking remnants of a backyard fire, which indicates that a social gathering of some kind only recently concluded (Figure 38). In addition, she lapses into a drunken reverie (Figure 39), which is audibly punctuated by a piercing electronic sound effect; she nearly falls asleep (Figure 40), but wakes with a jolt, immediately panic-stricken at the sound of her inaccessible baby's crying (the diegetic sound resumes, replacing the non-diegetic sound effect, with a jagged cut).



1: Several minutes into Shot 4, 'Em,' Waru appears in the background of the image while Em desperately tries to break into her house where her baby has been left alone.



38: On her way to test the back door, Em passes the scattered evidence of a social gathering only recently suspended. 'What the fuck!' she mutters in disbelief. Minimal exposition in the sequence provides little context for Em's discovery of her baby alone and locked in the house, though Em's ignorance of the circumstances is clear.



39: While Em looks for a way into the house, her concentration lapses, and she slumps over the porch fence, laughing at something viewers aren't privy to and seeming to forget her immediate goals.



40: The image of Em's reverie is high contrast black and white (in equal measure). A non-diegetic piercing sound accentuates her lapse from reverie into stupor.

Three kindred compositions stand out in "Em": in each, Em peers into the house from outside, a neglected child visible in the interior. In the first case, Waru appears on the television (Figure 1). In the second, Em, precariously balanced on the ladder, catches sight of her baby swaddled in blankets on the kitchen floor (Figure 41) and coos, "Momma's coming," before falling out of frame with a crash (the camera tilting slowly down in the wake of Em's fall to catch her sprawled in the grass, nauseous and in pain, Figure 42).



41: The reflection of the cluttered backyard



42: The shallow focus composition

merges with the similarly cluttered kitchen, the baby nestled in the juncture of the kitchen cabinets at the bottom of frame (center). Em's shadow on the window outlines the baby, part of Em's head out of focus at the bottom of the frame (right).

highlights Em's agonized expression against a blurred backdrop.

And in Shot 4's final (and most remarkable) composition, Em has purposefully positioned herself outside the house and the baby inside, just on the other side of the glass from where Em lays herself down to sober up (Figure 43). The visual symmetry of these three compositions communicates their significance; they stress Waru's and the baby's vulnerabilities inside the home, while Em's position outside looking in (first unintentionally, then on purpose) conveys ambivalence in her capability as a caretaker. Though Em clearly loves her baby, her alcohol consumption poses a threat. Just before lying down outside across from her baby, Em picks up the beer bottle she had carried from the car and breaks it (Figure 44).



43: The film's most striking image positions Em in the background, visible through the glass and ineffectually reaching for her baby in the foreground, closer to the camera and swaddled in light colors that contrast Em's dark hair, eyes and clothes



44: Only Em's lower half and (blurred) hand are visible as she picks up her beer bottle and smashes it in a rage.

While the multiple layers of the three "through the window" shots and the final composition's special poignance stand out in the sequence, a second trio of images complements them—in these, Em falls flat, wholly incapacitated. On the first occasion (Figure 32), Em collapses just after exiting the car. The second and third instances are rendered with more drama, the second due to the ironic juxtaposition of Em falling out of frame while cooing "Momma's coming" (with the camera's pause before pursuing Em down to the ground enhancing the tension between Em's desire to go to her baby's aid and her inability to do so). The third instance occurs after Em has managed to unlock the door and pick up her baby. She nearly passes out (for the second time in the sequence) while cradling her baby on the floor and leaning against the refrigerator. After managing, with considerable effort, to get herself and the baby upright (Figure 45), Em staggers several times before slamming into the wall and falling flat on the floor, eventually appearing upside down in the frame (Figure 46) in a rare close-up (most of the sequence frames Em in medium and medium-long shots to accommodate the emphasis on her constant movements).



32.



45: Em uses one hand braced against the kitchen counter to pull herself (holding the baby) upright. For a brief instant, Em appears steady on her feet, and she and



46: This striking composition appears near the end of the sequence (and functions as a sort of climax). The tight close-up frames Em completely upside down, the beauty of

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| the baby are central in a balanced composition. | her face and hair (accentuated by the high contrast) jarring in the context of her violent fall with the baby in hand. |

Writing for the *British Film Institute* (in the November 1999 issue), Janet Bergstrom comments on Akerman's groundbreaking and "personal way of screening women," in the process quoting Akerman on her approach to representing "the mother's gestures." Akerman said,

"I was looking with a great deal of attention and the attention wasn't distanced... For me, the way I looked at what was going on was a look of love and respect... I let her live her life in the middle of the frame... I let her be in her space." [27]

The compositions in "Em" illustrate the approach Akerman describes, and the space, attention and respect it entails. 42 years separate the releases of *Jeanne Dielman* and *Waru*. However, harsh social judgments levied against mothers are not less common now than then; in fact, a growing body of literature suggests that high social media usage intensifies mothers' feelings of inadequacy and awareness of social judgment, negatively impacting their mental health. [28] Asked to comment on planning and making "Em," Wolfe singled out the final composition (Figure 43) as "a really strong image" in her conception of the "mini-action film":

"I had written it that the camera was behind Em looking at Karena, the baby. On the day, the DOP (director of photography) flipped the shot and put Karena in the foreground, [and] it was so much better." [29]



43.

The camera lingers on this composition for the final moments of "Em," while the *Waru* score resumes for the first time in the take (and plays for 31 seconds until Shot 4 cuts to black: <https://soundcloud.com/laurenkingproductions/waru-em-no-more?in=laurenkingproductions/sets/waru-original-soundtrack-score>). Had this image proceeded as Wolfe originally intended, it would have reiterated the pattern of the other multi-layered window compositions (Figures 1 and 41), that is, privileging Em's perspective (the view over her shoulder) and placing the child at a distance. The spontaneous inversion here is impactful because it suddenly shifts the focus from Em's perspective and actions, which the 10-minute take had favored until this point. Furthermore, the non-diegetic score's audibility while Em sobs blocks the diegetic sound from this side of the glass. The apparently content baby is now between viewers and Em—a bold composition that reinforces *Waru*'s view that care for children is the responsibility of the entire community (and nation).



The integration of the score intensifies the empathy for Em already evoked by every aspect of the sequence's camerawork and mise-en-scène. The high-contrast imagery, which lights up Awhina Rose Ashby's face so that it appears to glow, and the unconventional framing (in particular, in Figures 43 and 46) enhance the passionate and committed performance Ashby delivers as Em. Em's story, which was, according to Wolfe, based on a book by "a mother whose children have been killed," recalls Charm's struggle (in *Waru*: Shot 1) not to blame Waru's young mother for his death. In *Waru*, "Mihi" and "Em" most directly confront the



43 and 46

difficult circumstances of struggling mothers who are socially disadvantaged and lack sufficient support; in addition, their neatly inverted scenarios—Mihi unable to leave home, and Em barred from getting in—communicate the ambivalence of domestic space for struggling mothers. Their long takes reorient viewers in the hope of, on one hand, inspiring fresh vantages on mothers like “Mihi” and “Em,” and on the other, undermining dominant racist and sexist ideologies that unjustly place blame on women like them for cycles of poverty, addiction, and abuse that are (as *Waru*: Shot 6’s Kiri insists) “everyone’s problem.”

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The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open

Robin Bourgeois' review of *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, and Culture* encapsulates the broader context of Indigenous feminism that *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* engages:

"Indigenous feminisms . . . operate from the position that social justice 'can be attained only through specific attention to gender and must be considered as an integral part of, rather than a subsidiary to, struggles for liberation.' The pluralism of feminism, here, is intentional, reflecting the position that 'a single, normative definition of Indigenous feminism remains impossible because Indigenous women's circumstances vary enormously throughout colonizing societies, where patriarchy dominates, and in Indigenous communities with distinct histories and cultural traditions.'" [30] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

My analysis of *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* hones in on the film's "attention to gender" and the diversity of Indigenous women's experiences in contemporary Canada through its feature of two protagonists, Rosie and Áila, whose "circumstances vary enormously."

The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open's plot derives from an experience Tailfeathers had in Vancouver, which she dwelled on for years after and was eventually driven to adapt to film. Asked in a *Vogue* interview to comment on the motivation of the film's long take shooting style, Tailfeathers replied,

"I wanted to make a film that would happen in real time, so that we have just the simple, short experience that these two strangers had together, and then we'd leave it where we leave it, so that the audience would walk away with the same feelings that probably the young woman and I were left with." [31]



47. The sound of a baby crying over a black screen opens the film. The first image captures Rosie changing seats on a public bus (moving frame left to right in a blur) to make way for a mother pushing a baby stroller (only the edge of the stroller and the sound of the baby are evident). Rosie, centered in medium close-up, wears a tie dye t-shirt, matching pink backpack, and a dark grey fleece jacket.





48. After exiting the bus and entering an industrial-looking apartment complex, Rosie enters a dark flat, passing a doorway through which a young man (later identified as her boyfriend) is briefly visible, anxiously yelling, 'Okay, I'll fuckin' get it to you, don't worry about it,' into a phone.



49: Áila's introduction involves her visit to the gynecologist to have an IUD inserted. Her face is visible in profile (medium close-up) after the camera tracks her (over the shoulder) into the consultation room. The low-key lighting pattern of the gynecologist's office is typical of medical spaces on-screen, with little to no key light enhancing the shadows on Áila's face and the harshness of the top-lighting.

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Rosie (Figure 47) is in her late teens and very pregnant, and lives with her abusive partner (Figure 48) and his mother, appearing to have few, if any, alternative options, while Áila (Figure 49) is at least a decade older and financially independent, and lives alone in a comfortably furnished apartment.

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| 50: After Rosie exits the bus, the camera tracks her in medium close-up from behind as she passes through a covered walkway. The soft exterior lighting and low contrast allow her dark hair and clothes to blend into the green fence geometrically encasing her. | 51: Parallel framing softens the hard cut from Rosie (seated on the sofa in the apartment of her boyfriend and his mother and frightened by the angry sounds of his rapid approach) to Áila (walking down the hallway and into the consultation room). Like in Figure 50, the camera tracks Áila in medium close-up from behind. In this case, though, Áila's light-colored blouse merges with the similarly-colored walls so that the back of her small head appears engulfed. |

A nearly 12-minute prelude introduces the two leads, mainly via lengthy tracking shots that frame Rosie (Figure 50) and Áila (Figure 51) in similar compositions. These firmly establish the characters' juxtaposition, which is fundamental to the film and its "real time" execution. At 11:52, the film's title card (Figure 52) appears immediately prior to Áila encountering a barefoot and distressed Rosie (Figure 53) on the street in the middle of a violent encounter with her boyfriend, whose presence is remarkably peripheral. While his threats are frequently audible off-screen, only a single brief and blurry image of him (Figure 54) features in this tense scene, which jump starts the 90-minute sequence shot that dominates the film. The film's drama hinges on Áila's efforts to persuade Rosie to seek social assistance (Áila advocates, in particular, for Rosie to admit herself to a women's shelter that they visit together). However, the intensity derives as much from tensions that simmer between the two women as from the question of whether or not Rosie will follow Áila's advice and pursue alternative living circumstances for herself and her unborn child.



52: After Áila exits the gynecologist's office and begins to walk down the busy early-evening Vancouver streets, a cut reveals an establishing shot of the city (the first shot not featuring either Rosie or Áila) glimpsed through a dark, out of focus fence. The carefully-designed and color-coordinated title appears over this shot in English, Kwak'wala, Sámi, and Blackfoot (to represent the diverse Indigenous heritages of Tailfeathers and Nelson, which match the characters they perform). The train proceeds (loudly) down the center and out of the frame, the color of the train cars matching the two tones of

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superimposed text. The sound of an enraged male voice is audible off-screen (screaming 'Rosie'), foreshadowing the cut to the wounded and barefoot Rosie, which initiates the 90-minute sequence shot.

53 and 54: The artfully-composed image of Rosie with freshly-painted toenails is at odds with her circumstances. Her boyfriend (off-screen) yells nearby; he seems to be calling for her, though his screaming is unintelligible. The camera tilts up, revealing her terrorized face, then pans right to where her boyfriend, barely visible in an extreme long shot, threatens to 'tear [her] fucking eyes out.'

The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open's long takes are formally distinct from the eight shots that constitute *Waru*. Brian Henderson's "The Long Take" helps clarify the technical difference between the two films:

"The long take rarely appears in its pure state (as a sequence filmed in one shot), but almost always in combination with some form of editing" (7).[32]

In fact, according to Henderson's assessment, "Mihi" and "Em" would qualify as "pure,"[50] the long take constraint established by Warkia and McNaughton in the spirit of what Mette Hjort calls, "Sincere submission to the rules" (in a chapter on *Italian for Beginners*' negotiation of the Dogme 95 rule-based framework). [34] *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open*, on the other hand, belongs in the more common category of long takes executed with "some form of editing," which Henderson describes as follows:

"The long take is not in itself a principle of construction . . . but is part of a *shooting style*, or characteristic way of shooting and building sequences" (7, emphasis in original).

According to Henderson's anatomy of the long take, *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* would not be "pure," but shot in a long take "*shooting style*" that approximates a sequence shot (i.e. a single take that encompasses multiple scenes and locations) but includes 12 hidden cuts (which are distinct from "expressive cuts," the main focus of Henderson's article).





The urgency of "real time" was Tailfeathers and Hepburn's main aim, which they achieved in collaboration with DP Norm Li, leading actor Nelson, and a small crew. They never set a strict "pure" long take target, and dramatic effect had priority over technique. Li sheds light on the thinking behind the film's "shooting style":

"[Tailfeathers and Hepburn] initially described the project to me as a long single shot allowing the actors to have a full emotional arc . . . By allowing scenes to breathe, their hope was to embrace and capture any unexpected moments. We all agreed that the film should be less about the technical feat of a single take and more about being part of the continuous experience with these two women . . . First and foremost, the directors felt that by having the actors perform from start to finish continuously over 90 minutes, it would create a heightened state of immediacy and urgency." [35]

While the film's co-leads are both First Nations women who live in Vancouver, the story and its execution underscore stark differences in the conditions of their lives and the social benefits and opportunities they are able to access. As described by Karen Han,

"The rapport between the two women is uneasy, not just because they're strangers, but because they seem to be complete opposites. Áila leads a comfortable, stable middle-class existence, and has just been fitted for an IUD. (She's decided she doesn't want to have children, even though her boyfriend does.) Rosie lives with her boyfriend and his mother, has no local support system, and is heavily pregnant.

Subtler differences make themselves known as the movie progresses, as when Rosie notes that even though they're both First Nations, Áila looks much whiter.”[36]

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| <p>55: While Áila puts a blue patient gown on over her blouse, a strategically hung medical infographic on the wall and featuring a pregnant mother and baby comes in and out of view: Áila in medium close-up in the foreground and the infographic in the background constitute the image's two planes. The baby's gaping mouth conveys a neediness that contributes to the poster's uneasy effect (in combination with Áila's pinched expression).</p> | <p>56. Hard top lighting intensifies the expression of Áila's obvious discomfort during the off-screen doctor's interrogation of her sexual history and reproductive plans.</p> |
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| <p>57: After the doctor's rote and invasive verbal interrogation, he directs Áila to lie down, advising her to expect a pain similar to that of a speculum's insertion during a vaginal exam. The sharp pain of the IUD is evident on Áila's face, which is relatively well-lit and on full display at this angle and in close-up.</p> | <p>58: Rigid composure succeeds pain in Áila's expression (still framed as in Figure 57).</p> |

The decision to introduce Áila in the process of having an IUD inserted is provocative (Figures 55, 56, 57, 58); on one level, it sets up a direct contrast between the reproductive realities of the two women, who exercise different levels of control and choice in their sexual lives. On another level, the IUD/late-stage pregnancy contrast represented by the two leads draws attention to reproductive autonomy as a critical social justice issue for Indigenous Canadian women. An article in the *Alberta Law Review* reports that

“Not only do many Aboriginal women have difficulty accessing health care services, they also suffer from more reproductive health-related ailments than their non-Aboriginal counterparts . . . Aboriginal mothers tend to be younger than non-Aboriginal mothers, they tend to have more children . . . [and] Canada's Aboriginal women confront significantly more reproductive health concerns and face a marked disparity in access to needed medical care compared with non-Aboriginal Canadian women” (722).[37]

The IUD insertion scene is ambivalent in tone regarding Áila's reproductive autonomy. The coldly unpleasant mise-en-scène of the gynecologist's office in conjunction with the doctor's rote and invasive interrogation of Áila's sexual history establish the experience as highly unpleasant, which the pregnant mother



52.

and needy baby infographic strategically placed behind Áila punctuates. The physical pain of IUD insertion only exacerbates the unpleasantness for Áila. Difficulty accessing health care services is only part of the problem Indigenous Canadian women face in relation to reproduction, the scene suggests; the routine operation of health care in practice, which subjects many women to censure in its enforcement of sexual norms, places special pressure on First Nations women, which Áila's middle-class appearance only partly protects her from and which, viewers can imagine, would bear down with greater force on Rosie.

The intersectional pressures that shape Rosie's experiences are poetically alluded to in the film's extraordinary title (Figure 52), which is borrowed from First Nations Canadian scholar and writer Billy-Ray Belcourt's essay poem of the same name.[38] In Belcourt's work, "*The body remembers when the world broke open*" simultaneously evokes birth and violence, two of the film's major concerns, and functions as a sort of poetic thesis for the film, which, through Rosie's characterization in particular, emphasizes the material weight of trauma (emotional and physical) that the body stores; this, the Rosie/Áila juxtaposition suggests, determines the scope of choices an individual is able to contemplate in determining their experience. Belcourt writes,

"To be Indigenous is also to be hurt on the way out, if the 'way out' is crowded by the past's razor sharp edges."

Although Belcourt's essay poem is not explicitly about the traumas of pregnancy or birth, Rosie seems to be modelled on one of the poem's most affective lines:

"A body can only jar so many spirits and trauma before it glitches, leaks, and splits at the seams."



55.

Rosie's introduction—when she moves to make room for the baby carriage, smiling softly off-screen in the baby's direction—indirectly suggests that she is looking forward to her own baby's birth. However, the cut (several minutes later) from her unstable home life (where she is threatened with imminent abuse) to Áila at the gynecologist stresses that the older woman's decade-plus experience negotiating the social regulation of her sexuality has led her to view maternity with significantly less enthusiasm. In other words, the film presents maternity with the ambivalence akin to that of the medical infographic (Figure 55). While there is something appealing about the pink-clad pregnant mother's protective embrace of the infant housed inside her, the image of the gape-mouthed baby is alarming, and the placement of the figures strangely elides the trauma of birth. Belcourt's line, "To be Indigenous is also to be hurt on the way out, if the 'way out' is crowded by the past's razor sharp edges," resonates with the painful history Rosie visibly carries and the violence she suffers in the film's present, which is prelude to her child's entrance into the world (its "br[eaking] open").

Rosie and Áila's transit through a series of public and private spaces in the film's sequence shot accentuates the varying degrees of protection and threat these locations offer Rosie; locations include, for instance, a public bus, a doctor's office, the city street, a taxi, and the women's shelter in addition to their apartments. The question of whether safe "shelter" for Rosie exists is the implicit enigma the film intentionally mobilizes and leaves unresolved. The charged dynamic between the two women after Áila brings Rosie home with her illuminates the social impasses the film is designed to communicate. The pair spends the longest time in Áila's apartment, and it is there that their strikingly different circumstances come into conflict.

The camera's odd placement and careful distance from Áila and Rosie (Figure 59) accentuates the tense silence that precedes Áila's hesitant question, "So what do you think you wanna do?" After Rosie reiterates her aversion to the police, Áila



59: When Áila and Rosie sit at the start of an uncomfortable conversation, the camera assumes an awkward position in relation to the two women—one that clearly does not provide an ideal view of their faces (especially Áila's). Now dressed in clothes borrowed from Áila, Rosie also blends into the background, the women's skin and hair contrasting the color of their shirts and the walls.



60: The camera approximates its previous position after briefly panning left to track Áila's departure off-screen; by doing so, the composition retains Áila's presence to accentuate the drama of Rosie's theft and Áila's imminent return.



61: A medium shot of Rosie's midsection registers her theft of Áila's wallet; as in other compositions in the sequence, the contrast of light and dark stands out against a neutral background.



suggests the shelter as “a place to stay for awhile.” Rosie immediately rejects this option (which she later considers). After another pause, Áila awkwardly revives the lopsided conversation:

“So you got anybody lookin’ out for you, Rosie?”
 “I look out for myself.”
 “And the baby?”

Ignoring this question, Rosie suspiciously asks whether Áila works for “MCFS,” the Ministry of Child and Family Services (an institution Rosie clearly mistrusts). “No,” Áila declares. The discussion suddenly derails when Rosie points out that Áila has bled through her jeans: “You’re gonna get it on your couch,” Rosie chastises. After the camera pans left to briefly register Áila’s embarrassed rush to the bathroom, it quickly reverts to Rosie, to capture her furtive transfer of cash she stole minutes earlier (out of Áila’s wallet) from the pocket of the borrowed sweatpants she is wearing to her backpack (Figure 60).

The relatively distant vantage of the living room segment is maintained after the pan left and back, but a slight change in position affords a better view of Rosie moving the cash, then anxiously waiting for Áila’s return. Here, the medium/medium-long shot framing of Rosie markedly contrasts the much closer positions of the camera to Rosie minutes earlier in the sequence, when she took advantage of an opportunity to sneak Áila’s wallet out of her handbag (Figure 61), and just before then, when the camera tracked Rosie into the bathroom, where she changed into Áila’s clean clothes and stole prescription drugs from her medicine cabinet. Rosie initially pauses upon entering the bathroom, taking a moment to reassure herself that the baby wasn’t harmed during the violent encounter they just escaped. She then places protective hands over her stomach in a manner that resembles the mother pictured in the medical office infographic (Figure 62).

On multiple occasions, the dialogue between the two women highlights that Áila does not possess clothes or shoes that fit Rosie (whose clothes had gotten wet and soiled and who ran shoeless to escape her boyfriend’s sudden aggression). Áila’s lack of materials to suit Rosie’s basic needs alludes to the inadequacy of Áila’s perspective on the circumstances of Rosie’s life and how they might be improved. Alternating between close and more distant perspectives on Rosie during this sequence varies the viewer’s proximity to Rosie and her actions. The close position to her very pregnant and battered body transmits the desperate impulse to protect herself and baby, while the longer view enables reflection on Rosie in broader contexts than her own self-protection, including the efforts of others (such as Áila and Child and Family Services) to try to provide support so that Rosie and her child don’t have to depend solely on Rosie’s instinct for self-preservation, which negative experiences of foster care have clearly honed. The camera placement and movement in relation to Rosie is crucial to the film’s complex stance on her predicament, which highlights how the abuse and its aftermath appear to Rosie moment by moment, while she carefully weighs difficult options. The accessibility of the money and prescription pills seem to be their primary appeal for her, while longer term and unknown scenarios inspire caution.

Nelson has spoken about harnessing painful personal experience in her outstanding performance of Rosie:

“My mom went through an abusive relationship, and I witnessed it as a kid . . . I went through foster care, and now every time I watch the

62: The bathroom compositions of Rosie are markedly different from those in the flat's main room. Here, her hunched over posture and protective cradle of her pregnant belly dominates the image in duplicate via the mirror's reflection. Low-key lighting intensifies the intimacy and interiority the image expresses.

film, I think back to the emotions I was feeling when we filmed it, because I used my own personal story and my mom's story to connect to Rosie more. Now, watching the film, I think about what my mom went through, and about how this film can help other Indigenous women feel that they can get out of these situations if they want to.”[39]

The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open met the goal the filmmakers had in mind for the long takes—that “having the actors perform from start to finish continuously over 90 minutes . . . would create a heightened state of immediacy and urgency.” This success is due in large part to the actor's generous and risky mobilization of her own experiences to enhance the cinematic vitality of her character (which is reminiscent of the influence Gardiner's experiences had on “Mihi”).

Conclusion

De Lauretis' “Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema” excerpts Akerman's oft-cited statement from a 1976 *Camera Obscura* interview:

“I *do* think [*Jeanna Dielman*] is a feminist film because I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman. They are the lowest in the hierarchy of film images . . . But more than the content, it's because of the style. If you choose to show a woman's gestures so precisely, it's because you love them” (118).[40]

In this essay, I have highlight the extraordinary attention to Indigenous women that long takes in *Waru* and *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* display. While these films' shooting styles resemble those of feminist classics of narrative cinema, their emphases on the diversity of Indigenous women's experiences in the present distinguish them from canonical films that effectively utilized long takes to highlight the systemic difficulties women face in patriarchal societies.

As Huhndorf and Suzack put it,

“Indigenous feminist analysis and activism must aim to understand the changing situations, the commonalities, and the specificities of Indigenous women across time and place [. . . and] must seek ultimately to attain social justice not only along gender lines, but also along those of race, class, and sexuality.”[41]

These films' representations of Mihi, Em and Rosie via long takes achieve precisely the “Indigenous feminist analysis and activism” Huhndorf and Suzack advocate. In a conversation about “Mihi,” Gardiner states,

“The root cause of all suffering is isolation and disconnection, then add poverty and it is a wonder anyone can find their way back from the edge. . . Mihi's story comes from the isolation of the struggle and my desire for our communities to develop empathy and understanding. If you can't understand how it is possible for [child abuse and neglect] to happen, then you can not be part of the solution.”[42]

These films written and directed by Indigenous women model alternative approaches to the long take that eschew the ostentation of long take execution in films that have dominated cultural conversations about this “shooting style” in the twenty-first century.

Film criticism (as represented, e.g., by film journalism in prestigious publications such as *The New Yorker* and *The Guardian*) tends to celebrate muscular long takes in high-budget films directed by men with men also in the DP role (such as *Children of Men*, *El secreto de sus ojos/ The Secret in Their Eyes*, and *Birdman*, to name a few). Moreover, the latter are mainly war and/or action films with men as their protagonists. In contrast, *Waru* and *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* feature Indigenous women as protagonists and focus on the challenges they face in domestic and local community settings. They do not recreate known histories, as do several highly praised twenty-first century long takes (in *Atonement* and *1917*, for example); they represent fictionalized versions of contemporary realities that have not yet been subjects of cinematic fixation. They also exemplify Bazin's concept of realism as expressed by Daniel Morgan:

"Realism is not a particular style, lack of style, or set of stylistic attributes, but a process, a mechanism—an achievement" (445). [43a]

Joyce Green described the international development of Indigenous feminism as follows:

"A number of women from Indigenous communities in the U.S., Sápmi (Samiland), Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia also seemed to be using a feminist analysis, or drawing on feminist theories or organizing principles, in political and community activism and in their writings." [44]

The evolution Green identifies in theories of Indigenous feminism is also visible in the emergence of Indigenous feminist cinema, which has gained significant traction in recent years as Indigenous women filmmakers from a variety of national and cultural backgrounds have produced works that illuminate the intersectional challenges of Indigenous women.

The feature of such films in the same festivals, such as imagineNATIVE, Māoriland, and the Samí Film Festival, alongside the intercultural exchanges these festivals actively promote, evidence the productive and transnational conversation Indigenous feminist cinema participates in. [45] At present, Indigenous women filmmakers are inspiring each other to tell stories about women who have not been well-represented by Hollywood or smaller national cinemas like Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand. Gardiner, when asked to share the "best [professional] advice" she received, answered,

"Merata Mita, a legend in our industry, and the last [and first] Māori woman to write and direct a feature film in New Zealand ("Mauri"), told me that filmmaking is a privilege afforded to very few. That privilege is a huge responsibility." [46]

The overlapping successes of Tailfeathers, Tracey Deer, [47] and the *Waru* directors represent the welcome expansion of that privilege, which has been achieved through the collaboration of Indigenous film professionals (and in fact two *Waru* directors, Gardiner and Briar Grace-Smith, were awarded the Sundance Institute's Merata Mita Fellowship in 2019 to develop their co-directed feature film, *Cousins*, which premieres early in 2021).

Indigenous feminist cinema is driven by pragmatism rather than theory, and aims to enhance the cultural visibility of Indigenous women by representing them in films that travel. Just like NZ social services fail to adequately support women like Mihi, high budget cinema has neglected their stories. However, the recent prominence of multimedia social justice campaigns spearheaded by Indigenous people, e.g. protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline and in defense of the

Black Hills, suggests a sea change in Indigenous screen activism. The transnational cinema network operating in close proximity to imagineNATIVE with affiliations around the globe stimulates, supports, and promotes collaborative Indigenous-authored projects, such as *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open*, *Waru* and *Warkia* and McNaughton's subsequent anthology films. This essay suggests that the shared features of these films are not incidental; rather, they demonstrate the blossoming of Indigenous feminist cinema and the utility of the long take as an Indigenous feminist tool.

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Notes

1. Cinematographer Norm Li described the planning and execution of the film's "real time" effect in an interview published in the October 2019 issue of *Canadian Cinematographer* (available online at <http://www1.csc.ca/publications/2019/201910/IssueWeb201910.pdf>). [[return to page 1](#)]

1a. For instance, *Waru* directors Ainsley Gardiner (whose long take, "Mihi," I discuss in-depth below) and Chelsea Winstanley are producers of the eagerly anticipated dystopian feature, *Night Raiders*, a Canada-Aotearoa New Zealand Indigenous co-production written and directed by Cree/Métis filmmaker Danis Goulet in which Tailfeathers stars and Nelson plays a supporting role.

2. In the wake of *Waru*'s commercial and critical successes, Warkia and McNaughton developed a second feature film project, *Vai* (2019), based on the *Waru* model, but in *Vai*, each of the eight long takes are set in a different Pacific nation and the directors are eight Pasifika women (see <https://www.nzfilm.co.nz/films/vai>). The recently announced *RED* follows the *Waru* pattern as well but with a focus on Western Australian Indigenous directors who will tell stories related to missing Indigenous women (see <https://www.if.com.au/eight-female-indigenous-writer-directors-selected-for-anthology-feature-red/>).

3. Kath Akuhata-Brown, "The women of *Waru*: 'We get shit done,'" *The Spinoff* 11 October 2017. <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/11-10-2017/the-women-of-waru-we-get-shit-done/>.

4. See <https://www.lexico.com/definition/whanau>.

5. Bayley Moor, "Far North Film-makers Contribute to Acclaimed *Waru*," *Stuff* 4 October 2017. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/local-news/northland/97529287/far-north-filmmakers-contribute-to-acclaimed-waru>.

6. Mark Kermode, "*Waru* review – death, guilt and Māori life lessons in eight acts," *The Guardian* 11 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/nov/11/waru-review-maori-drama-mark-kermode>.

7. The film was produced for a modest budget of NZ\$215,000 (approximately US\$150,000).

8. Miriam Ross and I (with the help of our film students) organized a screening of *Waru* and *Vai* at Victoria University of Wellington, which took place in October 2019 (<https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/seftms/about/events/waru-and-vaidouble-screening>). A roundtable discussion followed the screenings, and Warkia and McNaughton described the pre-production retreat during that discussion; a video recording of the roundtable is available through Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/463205124>.

9. Kath Akuhata-Brown, "The women of *Waru*: 'We get shit done,'" *The Spinoff* 11 October 2017. <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/11-10-2017/the-women-of-waru-we-get-shit-done/>.
10. Sturge and Lee perform these same production roles for Warkia and McNaughton's anthology *Vai*.
11. For example, Deborah Young's complimentary review is subtitled "A highly original structure contributes to a suspenseful film," (Deborah Young, "Waru: Film Review TIFF," *The Hollywood Reporter* 12 September 2017. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/waru-review-1038248>).
12. NZ has the "7th highest rate of child homicide in the OECD," and roughly 50% of child homicide victims with known perpetrators are killed by their mothers or fathers. (<https://www.childmatters.org.nz/insights/nz-statistics/>).
13. "Waru through the lens." *Radio New Zealand* 12 November 2017, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/standing-room-only/audio/2018621337/waru-through-the-lens>.
14. For example, prior to *Waru* Briar Grace-Smith (director of Shot 1: "Charm") primarily had writing credits in theater, film and television, while Casey Kaa (director of Shot 2: "Anahera") had worked as a production coordinator for a television series eight years before *Waru*'s debut.
15. "Ainsley Gardiner," *NZ On Screen*. <https://www.nzonscreen.com/profile/ainsley-gardiner/biography>.
16. Lyra H., "TIFF 2017 Women Directors: Meet Ainsley Gardiner – *Waru*," 11 September 2017, <https://womenandhollywood.com/tiff-2017-women-directors-meet-ainsley-gardiner-waru-d8c5edda8767/?source=rss---eb0b08436136---4>.
17. James Croot, "Waru: The nine female Māori filmmakers united in their passion to start a conversation," 22 October 2017, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/film/98027844/waru-the-nine-female-maori-filmmakers-united-in-their-passion-to-start-a-conversation>.
18. Ros Kinsman, "She's Come Undone: Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and Countercinema." *Quarterly review of film and video* 24, no. 3 (April 17, 2007): 217–224.
19. Teresa de Lauretis, "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema." *New German critique* 34, no. 34 (January 1, 1985): 154–175.
20. A New Zealander of non-Māori descent.
21. Cheryl Suzack, "Indigenous feminisms in Canada." *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 23, no. 4 (2015): 261-274. [[return to page 2](#)]
22. Lyra H., "TIFF 2017 Women Directors: Meet Ainsley Gardiner – *Waru*," 11 September 2017, <https://womenandhollywood.com/tiff-2017-women-directors-meet-ainsley-gardiner-waru-d8c5edda8767/?source=rss---eb0b08436136---4>.
23. Deborah Young, "Waru: Film Review TIFF," *The Hollywood Reporter* 12 September 2017. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/waru-review-1038248>.
24. "Katie Wolfe," *NZ On Screen*, <https://www.nzonscreen.com/profile/katie-wolfe/awards>.

25. James Croot, "Waru: The nine female Māori filmmakers united in their passion to start a conversation," 22 October 2017, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/film/98027844/waru-the-nine-female-maori-filmmakers-united-in-their-passion-to-start-a-conversation>.
26. James Croot, "Waru: The nine female Māori filmmakers united in their passion to start a conversation," 22 October 2017, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/film/98027844/waru-the-nine-female-maori-filmmakers-united-in-their-passion-to-start-a-conversation>.
27. Janet Bergstrom, "Keeping a Distance: Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*," November 1999 issue, updated 15 October 2015. <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/keeping-distance-chantal-akerman-s-jeanne-dielman>
28. For example, Padoa, Tricia, David Berle, and Lynette Roberts, "Comparative social media use and the mental health of mothers with high levels of perfectionism," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 37, no. 7 (2018): 514-535.
29. James Croot, "Waru: The nine female Māori filmmakers united in their passion to start a conversation," 22 October 2017, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/film/98027844/waru-the-nine-female-maori-filmmakers-united-in-their-passion-to-start-a-conversation>.
30. Robin Bourgeois, "Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, and Culture," University of Toronto Press, January 1, 2014: 154. [[return to page 3](#)]
31. Robert Sullivan, "In *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open*, Two Woman Grapple With Trauma and the Past," *Vogue* 5 December 2019. <https://www.vogue.com/article/the-body-remembers-when-the-world-broke-open-interview>.
32. Brian Henderson, "The Long Take." *Film Comment* 7.2 (1971): 6-11.
33. With the possible exception of superimpositions in "Mihi," which are edited embellishments to the "pure" long take
34. Mette Hjort, *Lone Scherfig's Italian for Beginners*. University of Washington Press, 2011: 48.
35. *Canadian Cinematographer* October 2019. <https://www.csc.ca/magazine/>.
36. Karen Han, "Ava DuVernay brings a moving 'single-shot' film to Netflix," *Polygon* 29 November 2019, <https://www.polygon.com/2019/11/29/20986142/the-body-remembers-when-the-world-broke-open-review-netflix-ava-duvernay>.
37. Erin Nelson, "Autonomy, equality, and access to sexual and reproductive health care," *Alta. L. Rev.* 54 (2016): 707-726.
38. Billy-Ray Belcourt, "The body remembers when the world broke open," 8 February 2017, *ArtsEverywhere*. <https://artseverywhere.ca/2017/02/08/body-remembers-world-broke-open/>.
39. Robert Sullivan, "In *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open*, Two Woman Grapple With Trauma and the Past," *Vogue* 5 December 2019. <https://www.vogue.com/article/the-body-remembers-when-the-world-broke-open-interview>.
40. "Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,"

41. Shari Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack, “Indigenous Feminism: Theorizing the Issues,” *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, and Culture*. Edited by Suzack et al. University of British Columbia Press, 2010: 3.

42. James Croot, “*Waru*: The nine female Māori filmmakers united in their passion to start a conversation,” 22 October 2017, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/film/98027844/waru-the-nine-female-maori-filmmakers-united-in-their-passion-to-start-a-conversation>.

43. Potential exceptions to the twenty-first century trends evident in the film culture discussion about long takes: celebrated long takes in *Hunger* and *12 Years a Slave* (both directed by Steve McQueen), which are stationary long takes that do not draw attention to cinematographic acrobatics; *Creed*’s first fight scene, which was orchestrated by a woman Director of Photography, Maryse Alberti; and the long takes in *Roma*, which are debatably Indigenous feminist (Mexican auteur Alfonso Cuarón was both *Roma*’s director and DP).

43a. Daniel Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics.” *Critical inquiry* 32, no. 3 (March 2006): 443–481.

44. Joyce Green, “Indigenous Feminism: From Symposium to Book,” *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*. Edited by Joyce Green. Fernwood Publishing, 2007: 14.

45. For example, imagineNATIVE coordinates the NATIVE Fellows Programme (<https://imaginenative.org/native-fellows-program>), and Māoriland hosts international Indigenous artists through its residency programme (<https://maorilandfilm.co.nz/maoriland-filmmakers-residency/>). Both festivals explicitly offer international development opportunities to Indigenous film professionals.

46. Lyra H., “TIFF 2017 Women Directors: Meet Ainsley Gardiner – *Waru*,” 11 September 2017, <https://womenandhollywood.com/tiff-2017-women-directors-meet-ainsley-gardiner-waru-d8c5edda8767/?source=rss---eb0b08436136---4>.

47. Tracey Deer’s dramatic feature *Beans* was the second runner up for 2020’s Toronto International Film Festival’s top prize, the People’s Choice Award.



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Part road movie, part coming-of-age story, and part social-issue drama, Andrea Arnold's *American Honey* (2016) is a film very much of its time.

Trouble in the heartland: class and culture in *American Honey*

by [Milo Sweedler](#)

Andrea Arnold's *American Honey* (2016) is a film of its time. Released in the United States four days after the first presidential debate between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Donald Trump, the film provides a fascinating snapshot of Middle America in the 2010s. Depicting a group of down-and-out youth who travel through the Midwest selling magazine subscriptions nobody wants, the film presents an image of the U.S. heartland as a mosaic of posh suburbs, upscale subdivisions, conglomerations of dilapidated bungalows, vast expanses of farmland, and a seemingly endless string of truckstops, roadside motels, convenience stores, and fast-food restaurants. This social landscape is seen alternately through the windows of the van that transports the magazine crew from sales location to sales location, and up-close and in-person as the sales associates go door-to-door hawking their wares. A veritable tour of the “red states” at the core of the country – the ones that would vote for Trump in the coming election – the movie presents the heartland as a socially fractured region characterized by extremes of wealth inequality.



An early scene in *American Honey* shows the lavish lifestyle of people living in one of the U.S.' wealthiest suburbs.



A later scene brings into relief the abject living conditions of the rural poor.

The mag crew, a motley group of misfits recruited on the road, hail from places as remote from one another as California, Oregon, Texas, Tennessee, Missouri, Florida, and New Jersey. Situated on the lowest rung of the social ladder, these marginalized youth show no class-consciousness. As the lyrics of one of their favorite rap songs would have it, their aspirations are, in effect, to “make money, get turnt” (the latter term meaning “excited,” “adrenalized,” or “intoxicated”).[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Aspiring to the American dream in the era of the American nightmare, the mag crew emblemizes the plight of countless millennials at a time when underemployment and precarious employment are becoming the rule rather than the exception.



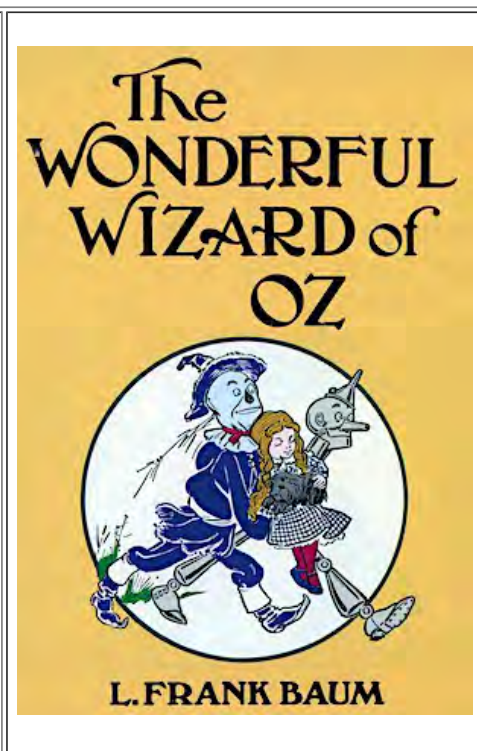
Star (Sasha Lane) looks out the window as the van traverses Anywhere, USA.

One of the striking features of this socially conscious film about a subculture of underprivileged youth is its exuberance. The ubiquitous hip-hop, country, and indie rock music playing at high volume as the van traverses the U.S. midlands contributes to the jubilant feel of the film. So too do its depictions of social relations within the multicultural mag crew. Although far from being unambiguous, the film's representation of these relations skews toward a vision of radical inclusion. This inclusivity is also emblematic of youth culture in the new millennium.

This article examines the vision of Middle America transmitted in Arnold's thought-provoking film. Taking as its point of departure film critic Pamela Hutchinson's remark that the movie's mixed-race heroine, Star (Sasha Lane), is a new Dorothy, the article begins, following a film overview and a gloss of its critical reception, with a comparative analysis of *American Honey's* worldview and the one presented in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900).

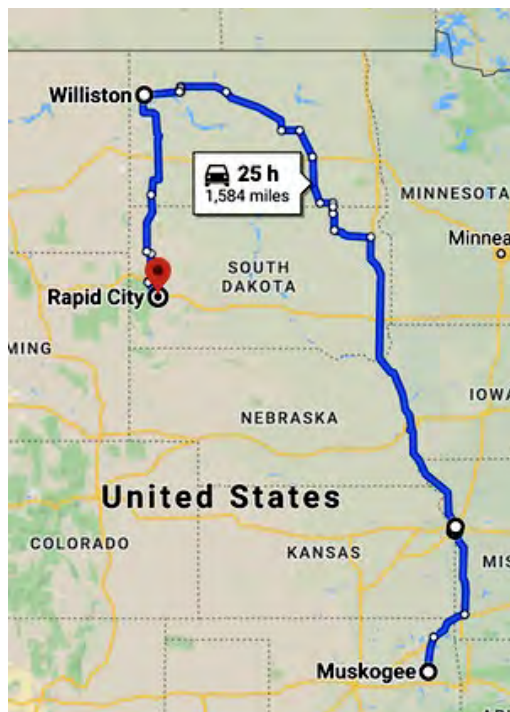


Pamela Hutchinson makes the case that *American Honey* is a retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).



L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) functions as a particularly illuminating intertext for Arnold's film.

Interpreted in the second half of the twentieth century as a national allegory of the post-depression United States, as the country emerged from the Panic of 1893, Baum's novel presents interesting parallels with Arnold's post-recession film, released in the wake of the Great Recession of 2007–09. Concentrating, in particular, on the movie's depiction of the affluent suburbs of Kansas City and its portrayal of people living in abject poverty in rural South Dakota, I argue that the film gives audio-visual form to the sharp socio-economic divisions that Thomas



American Honey's loosely scripted plot follows the itinerant magazine crew as it travels north from Oklahoma to the Dakotas.

Frank describes in *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (2004) and that Thomas Piketty analyzes on a global scale in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013).

I then examine the film's portrayals of its two other main characters, the mag crew's top seller, Jake (Shia LaBeouf), who initially introduces himself as being "Donald Trump-ish," and Krystal (Riley Keough), the shrewd owner of the mag-crew franchise, a self-described "Southern girl" (or "real American honey"), who treats Jake as her personal boy toy. The examination of the film's three main figures, who are involved in a love triangle that exposes Star to Krystal's wrath, leads to analyses of the film's depictions of sexuality and race relations. The article concludes with a meditation on the split between class-consciousness and multicultural awareness in both the film text and its national context, and ponders the ramifications of this split in the purview of the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election. While the heartland figured prominently in discussions of the 2016 election, the millennial generation – Gen Y or Z – has figured prominently in discussions of the 2020 election. Arnold's film contributes to our understanding of this potentially powerful political force.



The marginally employed members of the open and inclusive mag crew emblemize the millennial generation.



The love triangle between Star, Jake (Shia LaBeouf), and Krystal (Riley Keough) exposes Star to Krystal's vindictiveness.

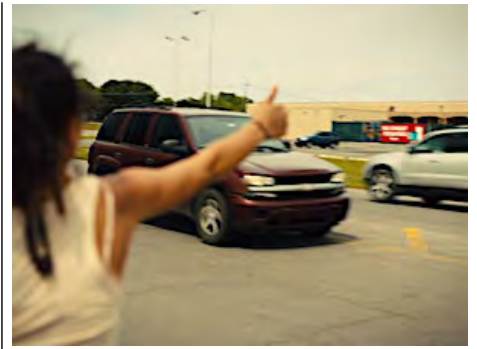
Film overview

Winner of the Jury Prize at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, *American Honey* depicts several weeks in Star's life as the young woman travels north from Oklahoma to the Dakotas with Krystal's itinerant magazine sales team. Part road movie, part coming-of-age story, and part social-issue drama, the film opens with a striking scene of the eighteen-year-old Star dumpster diving with her two pre-teen wards, Kelsey and Rubin (Summer Hunsaker and Brody Hunsaker).

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The film opens with a striking scene of Star and her two pre-teen wards dumpster diving for dinner.



Nobody stops for Star and her wards when they try to hitchhike home.

Finding the fixings for a full family dinner in the trash that squishes under her feet, Star gathers the children and starts her hitchhike home. Nobody stops for the unprepossessing threesome, but when a van full of rambunctious youth blasting hip-hop from the vehicle's open window passes them, one of the passengers mooning the hitchhikers from the backseat while another one (the not-yet-identified Jake) gives Star an inviting look from the front, they follow the troupe to the local K-Mart.

Star is captivated by the rowdy bunch, who spontaneously break into dance when contemporary pop star Rihanna's upbeat "We Found Love" starts playing over the store's loudspeakers. Exchanging a look and a smile with the ebullient Jake, whose glittery cell phone bounces out of his chest pocket while he pogo dances on the K-Mart checkout counter, she then follows this intriguing figure out into the parking lot. She returns his phone, and he offers her a job. Star initially declines Jake's offer to join the traveling magazine crew, but after fending off her drunken father, who gropes her while she prepares the family's evening meal, she hauls Kelsey and Rubin to the local roadhouse, where their mother is line dancing with a dozen or so country-western women, and abandons the kids with their incredulous mom.



The ebullient Jake captivates Star as he pogo dances on the K-Mart checkout counter. Other crewmembers dance in the background.



Jake proposes "a business opportunity" to Star in the K-Mart parking lot.

The rest of the film narrates the adventures of Star and the mag crew as they make their way north through the U.S. heartland. The loosely scripted plot follows the team from Muskogee, Oklahoma, where they pick up Star, to the wealthy suburbs of Kansas City and from there to locations in Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota.

As the film progresses, we glean the sales team's daily routine. The crew breaks



Riley (Christopher David Wright) passes a bottle back to Star as she takes on a joint.



The mag crew spills out of the motel. From left to right: Sean (Kenneth Kory Tucker), Runt (Dakota Powers), Shaunte (Shauna Rae Moseley), Katness (Crystal Ice), QT (Veronica Ezell), Kalium (Isaiah Stone), Pagan (Arielle Hilmes), Corey (McCaul Lombardi), and Riley.

into groups of two for the day. The van driver drops off the pairs in particular neighborhoods at the beginning of the day, each twosome goes door-to-door peddling magazine subscriptions to residents on its route, and the team reconvenes at the end of the day at a designated pick-up point for transportation back to the motel.

Arnold's inspiration for the mag crew came from a 2007 *New York Times* article on the topic by Ian Urbina. The film incorporates many details of Urbina's article, from the "violence, drug use, indebtedness and cheating of customers" to which many sellers interviewed by Urbina testify, to the weekly ritual called "Losers' Night" in the film, when the two team members with the lowest sales are forced to fight each other.[2] Neither Urbina's article nor Arnold's film shies away from presenting the hardships and challenges that the itinerant sales associates face on a daily basis. However, both the journalist and the filmmaker also draw attention to the attraction that the freewheeling lifestyle of endless partying holds for many recruits, and the bonds that form among team members during their time together on the road. Urbina, for example, cites a 23-year-old former seller who talks openly about the sex, drugs, and alcohol that filled the mag crew's nights. "But there's more to crew than that," this former seller insists. She recounts "having made some of her best friends, including her fiancé, working on the crew." [3]

The film amply depicts the sales agents' use of methamphetamine, marijuana, off-brand whisky, and cheap vodka, the sexual encounters that take place between team members, and the camaraderie that develops within the group. Even the anecdote about the young sales associate meeting her fiancé in the mag crew is woven obliquely into the narrative.



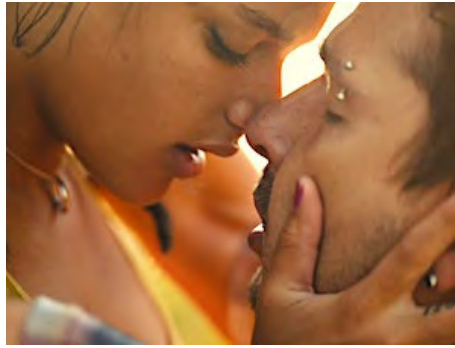
Mag-crew associates photographed for the Ian Urbina article that inspired Arnold's film (photos: Sandy Huffaker for the *New York Times*).

The principal romantic relationship explored in the film is the one that develops between Star and Jake. Assigned to shadow the sales team's power agent when she joins the group, the newcomer follows Jake door-to-door in order to learn the tricks of the trade. The two of them follow through on their mutual attraction, having sex on multiple occasions during their daily outings. However, Jake is wary of making their relationship public. Citing Krystal's rule against relationships in the mag crew – a rule that Krystal does not apply to herself and Jake, as numerous scenes between the franchise owner and her boy toy render obvious – Jake informs Star that "this relationship thing with me and you [...] it's not happening." When Star asks Jake for clarification, he explains:

"We just can't talk about it 'cause it's, um... She's got this thing. She

says, you know, love is bad for business. So there's no relationships in the mag crew."

The two lovers continue to pursue their relationship in fits and starts in the margins of the magazine crew, but they do so as discreetly as they can. Indeed, this on-again-off-again relationship constitutes the movie's principal plotline, as Star and Jake negotiate their mutual affection, their insecurities and resentments, their jealousies, and their individual senses of self-interest and self-preservation.



The on-again-off-again romance between Star and Jake drives *American Honey's* plot.



Star and Jake wordlessly reconcile through the van window after one of their serial fallings-out.

The film's open-ended conclusion, in which the two lovers wordlessly reconcile following one of their serial fallings-out, leaves us wondering how the two of them might fare as a couple in the future. Their aspirations to buy a little house and settle down, which each expresses as an individual dream without explicitly naming the other as the envisioned partner in this idyllic future, remain an unfulfilled fantasy when the film reaches its narrative conclusion and the closing credits start flashing on the screen.

Part of what makes this social drama/road movie-*cum*-coming-of-age/love story so captivating is the sense of authenticity exuded in the film. Although it is a fictional narrative with a plot, a screenplay of sorts, and paid actors playing imaginary characters in simulated situations, it feels like a slice of life recorded by a cinema journalist embedded in an actual mag crew. Cinematographer Robbie Ryan's freeform handheld camerawork accounts in no small measure for the film's quasi-documentary feel. So too do the true-to-life performances Arnold elicits from her troupe of mostly first-time actors. Many of these neophyte actors were selected for their socio-cultural proximity to the role they play in the film. The cast for the mag crew, lead actor Sasha Lane included, is comprised largely of nomadic young adults living on the fringes of society, whom Arnold recruited in shopping mall parking lots, at skate parks, and on public beaches – the very locations that informal employers such as mag-crew franchisees prowl to scout recruits.[4] Once she had assembled her largely street-cast troupe of actors and moved on to the shooting stage, Arnold refrained from giving cast members a complete film script. Rather than handing them a screenplay full of lines to memorize, the filmmaker passed the actors scene notes on the day of shooting.[5] The latter approach surely accounts to a large degree for the spontaneous feel of the onscreen interactions.



"Hey, what's up? Are you new? You should let me be the first one to fuck you," Corey says to Star by way of introduction.

I therefore find baffling *Sight & Sound* critic Simran Hans's charge that "the dialogue is often unnaturally expository." I find no evidence of "the script's [alleged] lack of subtlety." [6] Like *Variety's* Owen Gleiberman, I perceive the movie as "a bulletin – seductive, alarmed, fascinated – told from the inside." "The film's allure is that it's not just a story, it's an immersion," Gleiberman writes, "a vérité rhapsody about the live pulse of kids in the age of corporate nihilism." [7]

Faced with the myriad decisions a filmmaker must make when directing a movie, Arnold opts in virtually every case for whatever casting strategy, shooting technique, or directorial approach might make the film look and feel more like a *cinéma vérité* documentary and less like a work of narrative fiction. The movie comes across as an audio-visual status report on the heart of the nation, as seen from the perspective of subaltern youth living on the margins of society.

Critical reception

Many reviewers lauded the film's penetrating vision of contemporary youth culture. Tim Grierson, for example, writing in *Rolling Stone*, calls it "a Zeitgeist-y snapshot of youth culture." [8] Carlos Aguilar, in *Movie Maker*, characterizes it as "a ravishing vision of youth adrift." [9] Gleiberman, for his part, argues that it "takes the temperature of youth culture in a way that no movie has in years." [10] Other critics praised the film for its sensitive portrayal of female sexuality. The movie presents "some of the most truthful, intimate and, importantly, erotic depictions of female sexuality" that Simran Hans, for example, has "seen on screen in a long time." [11] Still other reviewers, such as the *New York Times*' Finn Cohen, admired the movie's "portrayal of poverty in the United States and the country's marginalized citizens." [12] Pamela Hutchinson, writing in this vein, declares in her *Sight & Sound* review that "this brilliant film draws the outline of a bleak economic landscape." [13]



One of the "truthful, intimate and, importantly, erotic depictions of female sexuality" that Simran Hans admires in her *Sight & Sound* review.

However, the film also had its detractors. Several critics objected to what they considered to be Arnold's overbearing ideological perspective. Richard Brody, for instance, writing in the *New Yorker*, asserts that "Arnold doesn't just depict characters in the fullness of their experience; she is brandishing an attitude." In his opinion, the filmmaker

"interposes that attitude between her characters and her viewers, filtering her characters' voices out of the transaction; in effect, she speaks for them." [14]

In a similar vein, Stephanie Zacharek, writing in *Time*, argues that

"there's a fine line between dramatizing human circumstances in a way that leaves us shaken or joyful, or both, and making a carefully calibrated sociology project. *American Honey*, its good intentions aside, tilts toward the latter." [15]

This assessment, especially in Zacharek's eloquent phrasing, has a grain of truth to it. Although some may argue, as Sean O'Hagan does in the *Guardian*, that "*American Honey* injects a visceral human element into the spaces where hard reporting doesn't," the film undoubtedly does have a political bias that it wears on its proverbial sleeve. [16]

Is that necessarily a bad thing? Some of the great works in the history of cinema have been motivated by political passion. Leaving aside right-wing classics such as D. W. Griffith's unabashedly racist *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and John Ford's arch-conservative *The Searchers* (1956), a short list of politically engaged films would include these:

- Sergei Eisenstein's avant-garde films of the 1920s,
- Charlie Chaplin's class-conscious comedies of the 1910s and 1920s and his brilliant spoof of Hitler in *The Great Dictator* (1940),
- the Marx brothers' satire of fascism in *Duck Soup* (1933),
- Stanley Kubrick's critique of Cold Warriors in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964),
- Spike Lee's dissection of racism in *Do the Right Thing* (1989),
- Alfonso Cuarón's allegory of the war on terror in *Children of Men* (2006), and
- Sarah Gavron's revisionist history of the British suffragettes in *Suffragette* (2015).



Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) depicts racial tensions in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. In this scene, Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) and his friends argue with Clifton (John Savage) in front of Clifton's Bed-Stuy residence.



The famous scene of Charlie Chaplin's tramp feasting on boiled shoe in *The Gold Rush* (1925).



Maud (Carey Mulligan) toils at the Glasshouse Laundry in Sarah Gavron's class-conscious story of the Votes for Women campaign in Edwardian England in *Suffragette* (2015).

American Honey is significantly more nuanced and subtle than any of those films.

Moreover, although Arnold lays bare social inequalities in the contemporary United States, she is profoundly ambiguous in her portrayal of the mag crew. *American Honey* delineates a socially fractured culture without turning the outcasts into heroes, victims, or villains. The film narrative unfolds against the

backdrop of a heartland that is depressingly bleak, even in the suburbs of the wealthy. At the same time, it captures a lack of cynicism in its young characters, despite the obvious hardships of their lives. The film succeeds in depicting both visions simultaneously, a rare achievement.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

American Honey's predecessors



Zoe (Natalie Press), an older version of *American Honey*'s Star, encourages her children to flip off a neighbor in *Wasp* (2003).

Critics have compared *American Honey* to a wide array of films. Titles mentioned include Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995), Ronald Bronstein's *Frownland* (2007), Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012), and films by the likes of Gus Van Sant, Terrence Malick, Ken Loach, Alan Clarke, and the Dardenne brothers.

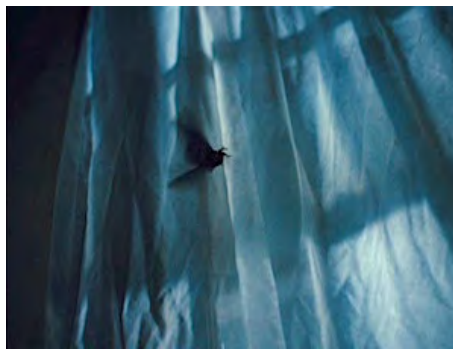
Arnold's own films also present themselves openly. Although it is the British auteur's first movie set and shot outside the United Kingdom, *American Honey* shows marked thematic and stylistic continuities with her other works. Gracefully shot by Robbie Ryan, all of Arnold's films center on assertive yet vulnerable women, all of them are class conscious, and they all have a strong sense of place.



Mia (Katie Jarvis), the fifteen-year-old protagonist in *Fish Tank* (2009), is like a younger version of Star.



The eponymous insect in *Wasp* buzzes against a windowpane before Zoe lets it out.



One of the numerous cutaway shots of insects in *American Honey* follows a moth fluttering against a window curtain.



The fish in *Fish Tank* meets a very different end than the liberated turtle in *American Honey*.

They also return obsessively to animal imagery. From the eponymous insect in *Wasp* (2003) to the fish in *Fish Tank* (2009) and the countless cut-away shots of birds and bugs in *American Honey*, Arnold's films exhibit a sustained fascination with wildlife. This recurrent motif creates a dual effect in Arnold's work. On the one hand, it serves a vaguely narrative function. *American Honey*, for instance, wordlessly concludes with Star setting free a turtle that Jake gave her. The scurrying reptile metaphorically evokes Star's own prospective liberation while



Like *American Honey*, Matthew Bright's *Freeway* (1996) addresses class, features a road trip by a resilient teenage girl, and draws on a familiar story.

simultaneously communicating something about the young woman's personality: she is someone who sets animals free. On the other hand, the objective neutrality of Ryan's wandering camera, combined with the director's knack for eliciting remarkably naturalistic performances from her actors, has the effect of creating an audio-visual equivalence between the human characters and the other animals that appear in the field of the moving image. Star and her peers are as natural onscreen as a moth fluttering against a window curtain, birds taking flight, or a turtle plunging into a pond.

A very different sort of beast appears in another film that bears comparison to *American Honey*. Like Arnold's coming-of-age road movie, Matthew Bright's *Freeway* (1996), starring a very young Reese Witherspoon, addresses class and features a road trip by a resilient teenage girl. The film explicitly presents itself as a retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood*, with the Reese Witherspoon character fleeing from a Big Bad Wolf played by an utterly repugnant Kiefer Sutherland. This intertextual reference to a familiar story suggests yet another parallel with *American Honey*, which Pamela Hutchinson felicitously suggests is a retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Post-Recession fictions

In her review of the film in *Sight & Sound*, Hutchinson compares Star to the iconic Middle American country girl immortalized by Judy Garland in Victor Fleming's 1939 MGM classic: "With dreadlocks for pigtails and a rucksack instead of a pinafore, Star is a new Dorothy." [17] [\[Open endnotes in new window\]](#)



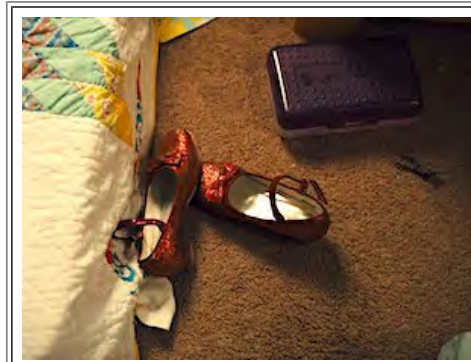
"With dreadlocks for pigtails and a rucksack instead of a pinafore, Star is a new Dorothy" (Hutchinson).



Dorothy, the Middle American country girl immortalized by Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

In Hutchinson's interpretation, the mag crew collectively incarnates this new Dorothy's traveling companions, Krystal plays the part of the Wicked Witch, and "Jake is both a companion and the cyclone, whisking Star into a new world." [18] One might quibble with the details of Hutchinson's comparison, emphasizing, for instance, the contrast between the original Dorothy's efforts to get back to her little house on the prairie and her beloved Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, on the one hand, and Star's lack of desire to return to her abusive father's ramshackle bungalow, on the other hand, but quibbles of this sort do not detract from the power of Hutchinson's insight. The juxtaposition of the two tales of wide-eyed Midwestern teenage girls leaving home and discovering a wild and wonderful world they did not know existed is evocative indeed.

Moreover, as if to buttress Hutchinson's interpretation, QT (Veronica Ezell), a butch crewmember with a half-shaved head, calls out the title of Fleming's film and the name of the *Wizard of Oz* heroine when they arrive in Kansas City roughly half an hour into the film. "Holy shit. Look at those fucking buildings," the awe-struck QT says as the Kansas City skyline comes into view. "*Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy," she continues. "I ain't never seen so many train tracks in my life." Although QT's reaction here is more akin to that of the *Oz* travelers when they arrive at the Emerald City than their hypothetical response to arriving in a mundane place like the Kansas of *The Wizard of Oz*, her exclamation invites us to draw connections between the two stories.



A cut-away shot of ruby slippers in Star's bedroom at the beginning of *American Honey* reinforces Hutchinson's suggestion that Star is "a new Dorothy."



The ruby slippers in *The Wizard of Oz*.



Glinda and the Wicked Witch, "the only two symbols of power in a film which is largely about the powerless" (Rushdie), face off in *The Wizard of Oz*.



As Rushdie observes, despite her glitter and glamour, Glinda is a decidedly unhelpful character in *The Wizard of Oz*. The obscure and contradictory advice she gives Dorothy leads the young girl down a perilous path that could easily have been avoided.

In his moving analysis of the MGM classic, Salman Rushdie makes three observations that are particularly pertinent to thinking about the relation of *American Honey* to *The Wizard of Oz*. First, he remarks that all the powerful characters in *Oz* are women. The wizard's powers turn out to be illusory, and "it's impossible to see the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and Cowardly Lion as classic Hollywood leading men." [19] Glinda and the Wicked Witch "are the only two symbols of power in a film which is largely about the powerless." [20] Second, Rushdie observes, "*The Wizard of Oz* is a film whose driving force is the inadequacy of adults, even good adults." [21] Finally, the author brilliantly argues that, contrary to what the movie's screenwriters would have us believe, *The Wizard of Oz* is a celebration of leaving home, not returning to it. He submits as evidence "Over the Rainbow," the movie's signature song:



The switch from drab monochromatic sepia to eye-popping Technicolor when Dorothy leaves Kansas and arrives in Oz hinders the spectator's ability to believe that *The Wizard of Oz* is really about the wonders of home.



The Wizard of Oz's depiction of life on the Kansas prairie is reminiscent of the Depression-era documentary photographs that Walker Evans, Dorothea Lang, and their colleagues took for Roosevelt's Farm Security Administration program.

"Anybody who has swallowed the scriptwriters' notion that this is a film about the superiority of 'home' over 'away' [...] would do well to listen to the yearning in Judy Garland's voice, as her face tilts towards the skies. What she expresses here [...] is the human dream of *leaving*." [22]

All of these observations find parallels in Arnold's film. The adults we encounter in *American Honey* are harmless at best, dangerous at worst. Without an adult role model, Star, like her MGM predecessor, "[takes] control of her own destiny" and "begins the process of becoming a grown-up herself." [23] *American Honey* is also a film in which women are more powerful than the men. Despite his prowess as a salesman and a seducer, Jake is Krystal's lackey. Whatever freedom he achieves from her over the course of the film is much more attenuated (and much more ambiguous) than the independence that Star asserts, right from the beginning, from the domineering mag-crew owner. Finally, with the exception of a single phone call that Star makes from the road to check in on Kelsey and Rubin, the teenager shows no concern for the home she leaves behind. Even more resolutely than its filmic intertext, *American Honey* is a celebration of "the human dream of *leaving*."

What Rushdie's analysis does not touch on is the socio-economic subtext of *Oz*. This omission is not surprising. Although the film's depiction of life on the Kansas prairie is reminiscent of the Depression-era documentary photographs that Walker Evans, Dorothea Lang, and their colleagues took in the 1930s for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Farm Security Administration program, the movie downplays the social dimensions of its source material. As numerous critics have argued, L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* allegorizes economic and political developments that unfolded on a national scale during the years just prior to the book's publication in 1900. The film, released in 1939, does not engage in a similar process relative to the events of the Great Depression.

Ideologically, Arnold's film reworks Baum's book more than Fleming's adaptation. Both *American Honey* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* transpose the economic downturn of their day into narrative form. Let us take a moment to examine how Baum's post-crisis novel and Arnold's post-recession film make this transposition.



In an influential article from 1964, Henry Littlefield argues that the Scarecrow in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* represents the embattled Midwestern farmers of the late nineteenth century, the Tin Woodman represents industrial laborers, the Cowardly Lion is a stand-in for William Jennings Bryan, and Dorothy “is Baum’s Miss Everyman.”

In an influential article from 1964, Henry Littlefield makes the case that the characters in Baum’s *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* represent specific people or social groups in turn-of-the-century political culture. The Scarecrow, for instance, metaphorically represents the Midwestern farmers who were going through a particularly difficult period in the late nineteenth century due largely to a monetary policy that favored the interests of Wall Street over those of Main Street. The Tin Woodman, in turn, represents industrial laborers, who were also in an embattled position at the close of the century, while the Cowardly Lion is a stand-in for William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic Representative from Nebraska and three-time presidential candidate, who unsuccessfully campaigned on a populist platform defending the working classes from the predations of bankers and industrialists. In this allegorical tale, the Wizard “might be any President from Grant to McKinley.” [24] An ineffectual puppet that wields no real power, he is beholden to the Wicked Witches of the East and West, the novel’s real power mongers, who function metaphorically, in Baum’s tale, as the capitalists on the coasts. Dorothy, finally, “is Baum’s Miss Everyman.” [25]



Democrat William Jennings Bryan ran three

In “Setting the Standards on the Road to Oz” (1991), Mitch Sanders pushes this allegorical interpretation further. The central event allegorized in *The Wonderful World of Oz*, according to Sanders, is the so-called “battle of the standards” of the late nineteenth century. Reminding his reader that the United States was just emerging from the grips of a severe economic depression when Baum’s novel appeared at the turn of the century, Sanders recounts that the downturn of the 1890s was due principally to two factors.

On the one hand, “competition and technological advances drove down [commodity] prices” while, on the other hand, the scarcity of gold (the principal basis for the world’s money at the time) functioned as a bulwark against inflation. [26] The deflationary pressure created by these two circumstances worked decidedly to debtors’ disadvantage. If, in 1880, a farmer needed to sell, say, 800 bushels of wheat in order to repay a debt, Sanders explains, that same farmer would need to sell twice as much grain to repay the debt if the price dropped by 50

times for US president on a populist platform defending farmers and industrial laborers from the predations of capital (image: Heritage Auctions, HA.com).

percent (which is precisely what happened in the early 1890s). In times of inflation, creditors can raise interest rates to compensate for a drop in currency value, but no such protection exists for debtors if prices decline. As long as gold remained the only money standard, farmers and workers would be caught in a financial predicament from which they would have great difficulty extricating themselves. It is in this context that William Jennings Bryan proposed restoring silver “as a freely coined monetary standard alongside gold.”[27]



Mitch Sanders argues that Baum's novel allegorizes the “battle of the standards” of the late nineteenth century. The perilous yellow brick road represents the gold standard (W.W. Denslow illustration for *Wonderful Wizard of Oz*).



In Sanders's interpretation, the magical powers that the silver shoes hold in Baum's novel represent the salutary potential of freely coined silver money (Denslow illustration for *Wonderful Wizard of Oz*).

Bryan's political rival, the Republican William McKinley, ran a campaign based on maintaining the gold standard in order to stave off inflation. Bryan managed to convince the majority of Midwestern farmers (the scarecrows) of his position, but he was unable to persuade a sufficient number of industrial laborers (the tin woodmen) that he was fighting for their interests. McKinley won the presidential elections of both 1896 and 1900, furthering the cause of the capitalists at the expense of the working classes.

In the novel, Sanders argues, the yellow brick road, the perilous path that Dorothy and her companions follow to Emerald City, represents the gold standard. It leads to the nation's glittering capital, where a charlatan figurehead promises everything to everyone, but in fact can deliver nothing. The silver shoes, by contrast (ruby slippers in the film), have magical powers. “By using the silver shoes,” Sanders comments, “Dorothy accomplishes her goal quite easily. Similarly, Populists believed that silver money could cure most of the ills of U.S. society. In reality and in literature,” Sanders concludes, “silver served the interests of common, everyday people.”[28]

The nineteenth-century “battle of the standards” might seem arcane in the early twenty-first century. It is essentially a form of class warfare, with Bryan taking the side of debtors (the poor) and McKinley siding with creditors (the rich). Battles of this sort take different forms at different times in the history of capitalism. The most spectacular recent iteration is undoubtedly the national bailout of Wall



Henry Paulson (left), US Treasury Secretary under George W. Bush (right), crafted the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), which used 700 billion tax dollars to bail out the Wall Street banks that had swindled countless investors of their savings (photo: Larry Downing/Reuters).

Street banks with taxpayer money in 2008. The capitalists' cause was advanced, in the latter case, not by maintaining a single monetary standard but more nakedly, by using hundreds of billions of tax dollars to buy "toxic assets" that remained on the banks' books following the collapse of the mortgage bond market in 2007–08. The government that, for decades, had been arguing that it could not afford to subsidize healthcare, daycare, afterschool programs for kids, free high-quality K–12 education for everyone, adequate benefits to war veterans, or a public university system that would enable people to get a college education without accumulating mountains of debt, suddenly produced, in the blink of an eye, the equivalent of nearly 5 percent of U.S. gross domestic product in order to bail out the institutions that had swindled countless investors of their savings.

American Honey appeared in the aftermath of this fiasco. In contrast to films like J.C. Chandor's *Margin Call* (2011) and Adam McKay's *The Big Short* (2015), which depict the meltdown from the perspective of Wall Street bankers and hedge fund managers, movies such as Jason Reitman's *Up in the Air* (2009) and John Wells's *The Company Men* (2010), which transpose the financial crisis onto fictional narratives of embattled business executives, or films like David Cronenberg's *Cosmopolis* (2012) and Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), which allegorize the meltdown via a central character that personifies the self-destructive economic system, Arnold's film centers on people at the bottom of the social scale. It resembles, in this regard, Ramin Bahrani's *99 Homes* (2015), which chronicles the fate of a family evicted from their foreclosed home in the wake of the housing market's collapse, and even more closely, Sean Baker's *The Florida Project* (2017), a mesmerizing account of a little girl, her neighborhood friends, and her menially self-employed mother living in a residential roadside motel in a nondescript suburb of Orlando, Florida.



Laura Dern and Andrew Garfield play a mother and son evicted from their foreclosed house during the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007–10 in Ramin Bahrani's *99 Homes* (2014).



Brooklyn Prince and Bria Vinaite star in *The Florida Project* (2017), Sean Baker's mesmerizing film about a little girl and her self-employed mother surviving the post-recession the best they can.

Like *The Florida Project*, *American Honey* is not a film about the financial crisis per se. It bears witness to the effects of the crash without thematizing the meltdown itself. It is an example of what Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski call the "twenty-first-century bust culture" in their introduction to *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film, and Television*.^[29] The movie obliquely documents the effects of the financial collapse rather than allegorizing, fictionalizing, or frontally depicting its causes. The itinerant magazine crew – a cross-section of informally employed youth surviving the post-recession the best they can – epitomizes this twenty-first-century "bust culture." So too, in her own way, does the self-righteous upper-class mother who reluctantly invites Star and Jake into her picture-perfect home toward the beginning of the film; and so, in a quite different way, does the stoned meth head lying zonked out on the couch while Star chats with her unsupervised children at the end of the film.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Our introduction to the upscale suburb of Missions Hills takes the form of a four-and-a-half minute driving tour.



"That's like a ten," QT says, giving the house a perfect score, as the van cruises past a stately mansion on a corner lot.



"No place like home"

Let us first examine the encounter with the sanctimonious upper-crust mother. The scene is set in the wealthy suburb of Mission Hills, located just west of Kansas City. Our introduction to the place takes the form of a four-and-a-half-minute driving tour filmed from inside the van that transports the mag crew from their dilapidated motel on the outskirts of town to the posh residential area on the Kansas-Missouri border. It begins with a traveling shot of an ostentatious stone fountain resembling the Moderno fountain in St. Peter's Square – this one adorning a suburban traffic circle rather than the main plaza of Vatican City. "Look at the water fountain, the fucking water fountain," QT says in a fake British accent, mimicking the snobs that might live in the neighborhood surrounding this faux European monument.

The van then moves block by block past rows of well-maintained and immaculately landscaped mansions. The gobsmacked crewmembers can barely believe their eyes. "Holy shit," QT exclaims as they pass a massive stone Cape Cod house on a corner lot. "Dude, that fucking place is sick," Corey (McCaul Lombardi) opines as the van cruises past a huge Georgian Revival with a U-shaped driveway. "Look at that house down there," QT says as she points to a modern-day château on an oversized lot. The only one in the group that does not seem to be impressed by all this opulence is Shaunte (Shawna Rae Moseley), who unambiguously states her opinion of Mission Hills: "Fuck this place. That's what I got to say."

Shaunte's appreciation here of Mission Hills is not entirely unlike the one expressed by Thomas Frank in his dissection of Middle American conservatism in *What's the Matter with Kansas?* This illustrious suburb with its "two square miles of rolling, landscaped exquisiteness" is "by far the richest town in Kansas and, indeed, one of the richest in the country," Frank reports. However, he continues, "to call it a town, while technically correct, is misleading. Mission Hills has three country clubs and a church but no businesses of any kind." Nor does it have "buses, commuter trains, or even proper sidewalks, in most places." [30] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) A nearly completely privatized constellation of magnificent estates with virtually no communal spaces or public services, Mission Hills is a testament to the concentration of wealth in the hands of people who have divested from the public good. It is as though Shaunte intuitively feels that the place is designed to exclude people like her. Although she mentions none of the suburb's attributes, her hostile reaction to the place underscores the sharp class division between the traveling mag crew and the upper-class residents of this super-rich suburb.

It is into this privatized paradise that Star and Jake venture on her first day on the job. The film condenses the day's sales calls into a single scene, which begins with a scruffy Jake and a bedraggled Star lifting a big brass horse-head shaped doorknocker and rapping it against a massive wooden door. Jake previously explained his sales technique to Star:

"Basically, as soon as they open that door and look at you, that's the critical moment. 'Cause in that second you got to work them, you got to read them, you got to be able to scan them and figure them out, figure what kind of person that person wants in their life. Then you got

Star's first sales call: Jake reaches for the big brass doorknocker of a suburban dream home in the Mission Hills district of northeastern Kansas.



The mistrustful woman (Laura Kirk) stands in her doorway, scrutinizing the unsightly twosome with her hand on the doorframe as if barring entry into her domestic enclave.



Destiny (Kaylin Mally) and her friends put on a provocative dance performance for Jake outside the living room window.



to be that person."

When a girl in her early teens (played by Kaylin Mally) opens the door, Jake immediately sets to work. After a quick introduction, he asks the girl to feel the sleeve of his sport coat and to guess what kind of material it is made of. "That's boyfriend material," he tells the mystified girl. "Genuine boyfriend." The teenager's smile and giggles indicate that Jake is right on the mark. What this pubescent girl wants from the mysterious stranger at the door is for him to flirt with her. When the girl's mother (Laura Kirk) then joins her daughter at the door, Jake instantly switches gears. Without missing a beat, he informs the skeptical looking woman that he and Star are "part of the Three Cs contest, which is a collegiate communications competition." What this woman wants, Jake decides in a flash, is to support an ambitious college student.

The tactic works. The mistrustful woman stands in her doorway, frowning at the unsightly twosome with her hand on the doorframe as if barring entry into her domestic enclave, but when Jake asks her if she could spare a glass of water for two thirsty travelers, she agrees to let them in "just for a moment" so that they can "tell [her] about the contest." Jake delivers a perfectly honed sales pitch, explaining that if the homemaker picks two items from a list of magazines, "that will go a huge way to making [his] dreams a reality." "When I get to 100,000 points," he expounds, "and I'm at like 88,000 now, I get a free year of school." The spiel appeals to the woman's sense of charity while subtly buttressing her implicit worldview. In effect, Jake offers the smug suburbanite an opportunity to atone for her inordinate wealth by sharing a minuscule portion of her fortune with an aspiring university student who is pulling himself up by his proverbial bootstraps.

Jake appears to be moving toward closing the sale when Star, who has been witnessing the exchange between the smooth-talking salesman and his mark, sabotages the transaction. Contradicting one after another of Jake's assertions, she finally tells her partner to "go fuck [himself]." This is the last straw for the self-righteous housewife. "I have been trying to be Christian," she informs her visitors, "but I can see that the devil has a hold of the two of you." Star retorts that, in her opinion, the devil has a hold of the homemaker's daughter, who has been putting on a provocative dance performance, presumably for Jake's benefit, outside the living room window. "Destiny, turn off the music and put some clothes on!" the mother shrieks at her scantily clad daughter as Star and Jake make their way to the front door and slip back out into the tree-lined street.

The cultural clash between this paragon of domesticity and piety, on the one hand, and the nomadic heathens, on the other, harks back to the movie's opening sequence, when a lone woman in a mini-van honks at Star and her two wards instead of picking up the hitchhiking threesome. "I hope He comes all over your car!" Star yells at the passing vehicle in response to the proclamation that "God is coming" plastered in iridescent letters across the van's rear window.

As Frank's treatise on the culture wars that have consumed Kansas for the past few decades brings into relief, religious self-righteousness, whether heartfelt and genuine or cynical and opportunistic, is one of the hallmarks of the Sunflower State. Kansas is home not only to Koch Industries, the mega-corporation run by the notorious Koch brothers, who played a considerable role in pulling the country "to the right, to the right, farther to the right." [31] It is also home to one David Bawden, a devout Catholic who, in 1990, believing that all the popes since Vatican II were heretical and therefore illegitimate, "called a papal election, and got himself chosen pope: Pope Michael I." [32] This election of Pope Michael of Kansas, conducted in a thrift store owned by Bawden's father and unanimously endorsed by all five (yes, five) participants in the conclave, is a quintessentially

"I hope He comes all over your car!" Star yells at a passing mini-van with the words "God is coming" plastered in iridescent letters across its back window.



Pope Michael of Kansas (All Souls Day – Pope Michael, Nov. 12, 2011, YouTube).



Star takes in her unfamiliar surroundings as she enters into the Mission Hills mansion.

Kansan phenomenon, in Frank's opinion. The state "is a magnet for the preternaturally pious, for every stripe of Christian holy man from the hermetic to the prophetic to the theocratic." [33]

However, while the dialogue emphasizes the culture clash between the reverent housewife and her irreverent guests, the mise-en-scène brings into relief the class difference that separates the two parties. The camera's fixation on Star when she and Jake enter into the Mission Hills mansion captures the young woman's reaction to this unfamiliar environment. Instead of engaging with her interlocutor, Star scans her surroundings, taking in the crystal chandelier hanging from the fourteen-foot ceiling above her head and the charmingly appointed parlor off to the right of the palatial foyer.

When the homemaker tells her guests to "excuse the mess," the apology therefore comes across like a bad joke. The mess in question consists of a mound of presents on the living-room coffee table – remnants, the mother explains, of her daughter's birthday party. A close-up of this tabletop contrasts pointedly with a similar shot from earlier in the film. Whereas one shot depicts jewelry in a little velvet-lined box, an electronic device in its original packaging, a framed photo-portrait, crumpled wrapping paper, and party favors piled on the table's surface, the other shows an overflowing ashtray and crushed beer cans sitting on the living-room coffee table in the tumbledown bungalow that Kelsey, Rubin, Star, and their alcoholic father called home. These contrasting close-ups visually distill, for the spectator, the disjunction between Star's world and the one she enters in Mission Hills. As the memorable line from *The Wizard of Oz* would have it, this land of golf courses and gaudy mansions is "no place like home."



"Excuse the mess," the Mission Hills homemaker says in reference to a mound of birthday presents on the living-room coffee table.



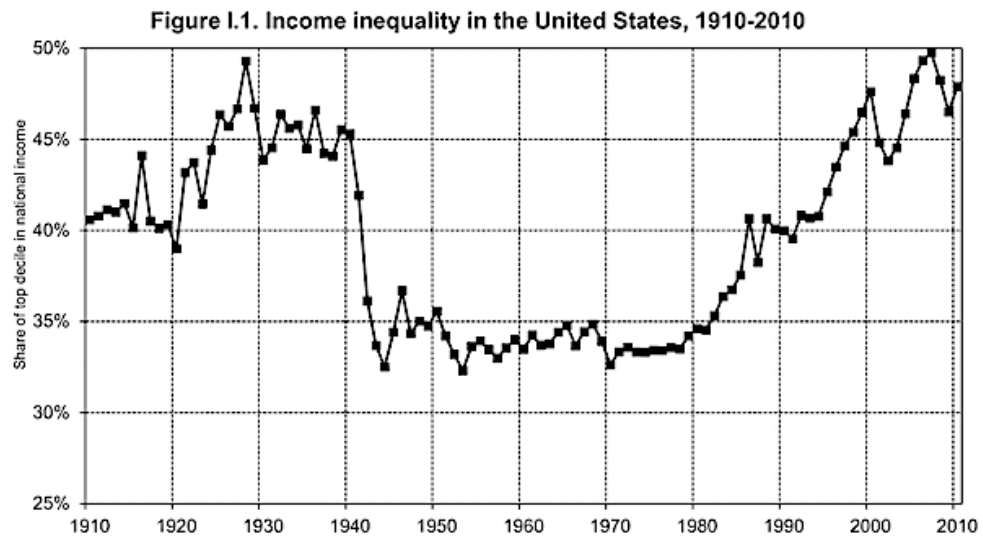
A close-up of crumpled beer cans and an overflowing ashtray on the living-room coffee table in Star's former home stands in sharp contrast to the shot of birthday presents on the coffee table at the Mission Hills mansion.

How the other 99 percent lives

As Frank explains, Mission Hills has been a wealthy suburb since it was first developed in the early twentieth century. However, it is only in the past few decades that the place has veritably separated itself from the rest of the state. Through the 1970s, Frank recounts, Mission Hills was a place "where one found Pontiacs and riding lawn mowers and driveway basketball courts and even the occasional ranch house with an asphalt roof." Many of the neighborhood's historic mansions were still standing, but they "were now overgrown with vines and invisible from the street thanks to shrubbery and weeds that had been neglected for years." [34] Since the 1980s, many of the grand old houses and the more modest post-War homes have been knocked down and replaced with brand-new

mega-mansions of one style or another. Frank recognizes that this sort of transformation is by no means unique to Mission Hills. “You can observe the same changes in Shaker Heights or La Jolla or Winnetka or Ann Coulter’s hometown of New Canaan, Connecticut.” What these changes reflect, in the Midwestern historian’s view, is “the simplest and hardest of economic realities: The fortunes of Mission Hills rise and fall in inverse proportion to the fortunes of ordinary working people.” [35]

This mini-history of Mission Hills and Frank’s interpretation of the changes he describes call to mind the central argument of economist Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Since roughly 1980, Piketty demonstrates, the distribution of global wealth, which had been at its most equitable level in recorded economic history during the previous three or four decades, has been following a trend toward ever-greater inequality. If the world continues on its current trajectory, Piketty warns, the gap between the wealthiest people on the planet and the rest of the world’s population will soon be wider than it has ever been. Already, the economist reports, the United States has “a record level of inequality of income from labor (probably higher than in any other society at any time in the past, anywhere in the world).” [36]



Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* puts concrete numbers to the social inequality described by Frank in *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* and depicted by Arnold in *American Honey*. Figure I.1, above, shows income inequality in the United States reaching its highest level in recorded economic history (graphic: piketty.pse.ens.fr/capital21c).

American Honey gives audio-visual form to this state of affairs. As the mag crew’s journey progresses through the heartland, the people they encounter become poorer and poorer. The crew’s final stop, in the movie’s penultimate sequence, takes us into the lower depths of this Middle American social landscape. Like in the Mission Hills sequence, our introduction to the impoverished community on the outskirts of Rapid City, South Dakota, takes the form of a driving tour. Automobiles in various states of repair stand in front of trailers and ramshackle bungalows, trash and discarded toys litter residents’ front yards, windows are covered with sheets of translucent plastic, a satellite dish adorns a family’s front porch, and everywhere adults congregate in driveways while children play in inflatable pools. Whereas there is not a resident in sight in Mission Hills, here the whole neighborhood seems to be out in public. We seem to have landed in a different world from the Oz-like archipelago of mega-mansions.

Hutchinson suggests that this arrival in Rapid City is *American Honey*’s version of Dorothy’s return home. Rather than actually going back to the home she left at



Hutchinson suggests that Star's arrival in Rapid City is *American Honey's* version of Dorothy's return home.



The shot of the bare fridge bespeaks the social situation of the household Star visits toward the end of the film.



At the foot of the couch where the Rapid City mother lies comatose, a ziplock dime bag full of white powder lies next to a glass pipe.

the beginning of the film, Star finds “a place just like it, an emerald-painted house where the neglected children of an addict mother play unsupervised and the fridge is all but empty.” [37] If anything, the household that Star visits at the end of the movie is even worse off than the one she left. Whereas the refrigerator at Star's house was stocked with provisions scavenged from dumpsters, this one contains a take-out pizza box, a nearly empty bottle of ketchup, and a two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew. Seeing the abject conditions in which these children are living, Star falls back into her role as caretaker and provider. Instead of trying to sell these penniless kids magazine subscriptions, she goes out and buys them groceries.

As in the two previous glimpses into a family's domestic space, here again, the scene contains a close-up of a particular detail that crystallizes the family's social situation. At the foot of the couch where the mother lies comatose while her children offer the visitor a mug of Mountain Dew and sing her their favorite Dead Kennedys song, a ziplock dime bag full of white powder lies next to a glass pipe. Whereas Kelsey, Rubin, and Star had an alcoholic father, these children have a meth-addicted mother.

As this circular *Wizard of Oz*-like structure suggests, there is this little forward narrative progression in *American Honey*. Star metaphorically ends up more or less where she started. The dissimilar social circumstances that the film depicts as the mag crew travels through the Midwest attest to geographical variations, not historical or narrative changes. What the film communicates is a snapshot of a particular region at a given moment in time. It is if Arnold set out to use the format of the feature film to document the state of the heartland in the early twenty-first century. The plot feels secondary to the imagery. Rather than using the heartland as a backdrop for a coming-of-age story, one senses that Arnold used the story as pretext for examining the region.

The wolf of Walmart

The particular moment captured in this class-conscious road movie is the mid-2010s. Writing in the *New York Times* two days before the film's theatrical release in the United States – which is to say, two days after the first presidential debate between Clinton and Trump – Finn Cohen situates *American Honey* in relation to this context:

“It's not a political film, per se, but it is difficult not to view it as prescient [...] as the surreal American election barrels tumultuously toward a conclusion.” [38]

In this light, Jake's self-characterization as being “Donald Trump-ish” invites comment. Although this Trump reference is a throwaway remark, which Jake makes self-mockingly in reference to his oversized pinstripe trousers rather than his inner character, it reveals more about the small-time con artist than he perhaps intends. If, as Amanda Marcotte contends in *Troll Nation*, the sitting president is “the platonic idea of a successful con man,” so too, in his own way, is the mag crew's power agent. [39] Like the title characters of Dan Gilroy's *Nightcrawler* (2014) and Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Jake cuts a Trump-like figure. He is not only a self-important businessman, albeit on an



The Wolf of Walmart: Jake in his “Donald Trump-ish” pants.



Like the title character in Dan Gilroy’s *Nightcrawler* (2014), Jake cuts a Trump-like figure.

infinitesimally smaller scale than the current Wolf of Washington, and a compulsive liar to boot. He is also a relentless salesman, who does not take “no” for an answer. As Trump baldly explains in his ghost written memoir, *The Art of the Deal*,

“My style of deal-making is quite simple and straightforward. I aim very high, and then I just keep pushing and pushing and pushing to get what I’m after.”[40]

Since 2017, the world has had the opportunity to see how this approach to deal making works in the realm of international politics. The film depicts how it might be applied to the unglamorous art of selling magazine subscriptions.

Jake is not the only “Trump-ish” figure in the film. Krystal also bears a certain family resemblance to the 45th president. The rallying chant that she has the crew sing before setting out for the day could come right out of Trump’s mouth. “I said, one, two, three, four, five. This loser ain’t got no job,” the crewmembers chant in reference to the fate that will await them if they do not make quota. The refrain calls to mind the famous tagline of *The Apprentice*, the reality TV show hosted by Trump between 2004 and 2015: “You’re fired,” the talk-show host serially informs the episode’s designated “losers” with smug self-satisfaction.

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| <p>“You’re fired,” Trump informs a designated “loser” on <i>The Apprentice</i> (NBC).</p> | <p>“I said, one, two, three, four, five. This loser ain’t got no job,” crewmembers chant in reference to the fate that will await them if they do not make quota.</p> |

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Some of the “very fine people” that gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia, for the Unite the Right rally of August 11–12, 2017 (photo: Anthony Crider/Wikipedia).



Star embodies a potent counter-image to the popular image of the US heartland as “buffered and all-American: white, rural, full of aging churchgoers, conservative voters, corn, and pigs” (Hoganson).

Color blindness in the age of MAGA

Trump is, of course, not only an imposing businessman and celebrity television host turned president. He is also the most unabashed racist to have occupied the White House in generations. This is a man who calls immigrants “invaders,” Muslims “terrorists,” and Mexicans “rapists.” The endorsement he received from the Ku Klux Klan speaks volumes about his racial politics. The candidate’s reluctance to repudiate this endorsement makes the 1927 arrest of his father, Fred Trump, at a KKK rally in New York City seem more than anecdotal.[41] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) In case anyone had lingering doubts about the president’s sympathies or allegiances, his refusal to denounce the “very fine people,” as he called them, that descended on Charlottesville, Virginia, brandishing swastikas, Confederate flags, and “Trump/Pence” signs for a Unite the Right rally in August 2017, even after one of the demonstrators drove his car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing one person and injuring 19 others in the process, should set the record straight.[42] Trump has arguably done more to inflame racial hatred on a national scale than any U.S. citizen in living memory. Decades of social progress have been reversed at an alarming speed since he took office in 2017. “Make America Great Again” (abbreviated to “MAGA”), the Trump campaign slogan that has become a rallying cry for his supporters in the so-called “alt-right,” is a dog-whistle call to return the country to the pre-Civil Rights era.

In this context, casting “Miss Everyman” (as Littlefield’s awkward phrase would have it) as a woman of color comes across as an intervention in the racial politics that have taken on a renewed urgency in the past few years. Arnold’s decision to have a mixed-race twenty-year-old with dreadlocks play the part of the new Dorothy hardly seems incidental. This iconic figure embodies a potent counter-image to the popular image of the heartland as “buffered and all-American: white, rural, full of aging churchgoers, conservative voters, corn, and pigs.”[43] As Kristin Hoganson writes in *The Heartland: An American History*, “the heartland serves as a symbolic center in national mythologies.” U.S. citizens, she writes, “may not agree on who they are as a whole, but they think they know the nature of their heart. Local. Insulated. Exceptionalist. Isolationist. Provincial.”[44] *American Honey* proposes a counter-myth to this myth of heartland as an all-white bastion of racial purity. Star is a decidedly multicultural metonymy for the Middle West.

However, although Star’s screen presence in every scene of *American Honey* beckons the viewer to consider the state of race relations in the age of MAGA, the screenplay is curiously silent on the subject. Visually, race is front and center in this moving-picture snapshot of Middle America; narratively and thematically, it is conspicuously absent.

Rather than faulting Arnold for failing to probe the racial issues that her film raises, I see the film’s near silence on the subject as one of its strengths. *American Honey* expressly represents race as a non-issue, not by omission but by a glaringly obvious inclusion that it refrains from overtly thematizing.

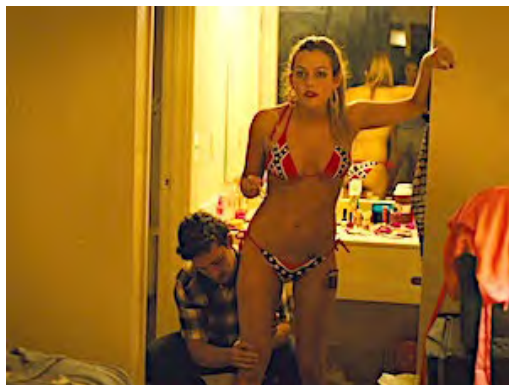
The film’s conspicuous down playing of racial differences takes diverse forms. Imitating the African-American rappers that they listen to as they travel around the heartland, for instance, the white crewmembers use a derivation of the N-



Interracial solidarity: members of Krystal's mag crew bond with members of another crew in a motel parking lot.



"American Honey," the Lady Antebellum song that gives Arnold's film its title.



The arresting shot of Krystal in her Rebel-flag bikini portrays her not only as a dominatrix and a taskmaster, but also as a woman who harbors a nostalgia for the Old South.

word to refer to one another. The term is devoid of injurious connotations in their lexicon. They use it as a term of endearment, not a racial slur, but the word resonates differently when they apply it to the brown-skinned Star and when they use it to refer to one another. Neither Star nor her peers seem to notice this incongruity. The crew appears to have become post-racial to the point of no longer distinguishing at all between people on the basis of race.

Conversely, the white descriptors that Krystal uses to refer to Star when the two women first meet also pass without comment. "You must be the little redneck Jake found," Krystal says in lieu of introduction when she first meets Star. When the roadside recruit tells her new boss that she is from Texas, the crew owner continues in this vein: "So you're a Southern girl, a real American honey like me." The latter clause makes reference to the song that gives the film its title, Lady Antebellum's 2010 country music hit, "American Honey," which we hear at full volume in a sing-along toward the end of the film. The movie title comes, in sum, from a ditty about a Southern belle, written and performed in one of the few genres of homegrown U.S. popular music that did not originate in African-American communities by a band whose name conjures the pre-Civil War era. The title of this quintessentially white song is then used, in the film, to refer to both a Caucasian woman played by Elvis Presley's granddaughter and another woman of African and Māori descent. It is as if Krystal is blind to Star's skin color, to the extent that she would use such a racially loaded expression to refer indifferently to herself and her dreadlocked employee.

Krystal's color blindness when she meets Star is particularly surprising given the crew owner's implicit nostalgia for the Old South. This nostalgia, subtly evoked in her initial exchange with Star, leaps off the screen in a later scene, when Krystal summons the new recruit to her motel room for a tongue-lashing. Krystal is upset that Jake, who has been training Star for the past few days, has stopped making money. She wants to know why. As she grills her defensive subordinate, Krystal stands up from the bed where she has been counting money, calls Jake out of the bathroom, and instructs him to apply self-tanning lotion to her legs. The medium long shot of Krystal standing in front of the bathroom mirror, Jake slathering her thighs with lotion as she threatens Star with dismissal, encapsulates the power dynamic among the three figures while providing a striking portrait of the mag-crew owner. Essential to this portrait is the costume Krystal is wearing. Clad in a skimpy bikini with a Confederate-flag motif, Krystal is portrayed here not only as a dominatrix and a taskmaster, but also as a woman who harbors a nostalgia for the era when African Americans in the Southern states had the legal status of personal property.

This arresting shot of Krystal in her Rebel-flag bikini recalls a scene from earlier in the film, when Star's dad, Nathan (Johnny Pierce II), a gaunt white man in his late thirties, molests Star while she prepares dinner. As he forces his daughter to dance with him, hugging her tightly, squeezing her rear end, and licking her neck while she cries silently to herself, we see a Confederate banner hanging over a window in the background. The appearance here of the Stars and Bars is even



As Nathan (Johnny Pierce II) molests Star, we see a Confederate flag hanging over a window in the background.

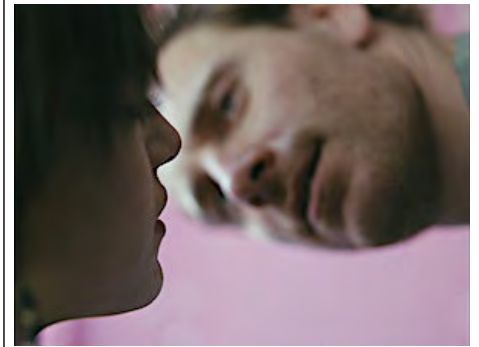
more disturbing than the presence of the motif on Krystal's bikini in the later scene. It raises a multitude of unanswered questions about the relationship between Star's neo-Confederate father and her absent mother, what it must have been like for the mixed-race girl to have grown up with a presumably racist dad, and what it must be like for her to continue to share a house with this presumptive bigot. By silently incorporating the Rebel flag into the mise-en-scène of the family living room, the film forcefully beckons the viewer to ask herself a welter of questions that it refrains from answering.

The film is intentionally vague about the family Star is fleeing from. Is the man in the bungalow who encroaches on her sexually her father? She refers to him as "dad," but the movie does not spell out whether he is her biological father or her stepfather. Are the children Star cares for her half-siblings, and the woman dancing at the bar their mother? Where is Star's biological mother? The movie leaves all these questions unanswered, but it strongly implies that the family Star is fleeing from is not only sexually abusive but also incestuous.

The interaction between Star and Nathan recalls the relationship between Mia (Katie Jarvis), the headstrong fifteen-year-old protagonist of *Fish Tank*, and Conor (Michael Fassbender), Mia's mother's freewheeling boyfriend, who seduces the teenage heroine midway through the film. Nathan is like a charmless version of the charming Conor. However, in contrast to *Fish Tank*, which clarifies the relationships among the characters, *American Honey* obscures the details of Star's family situation.



Star fends off her dad with both hands.



Conor (Michael Fassbender), Mia's mother's freewheeling boyfriend, puts the moves on Mia in *Fish Tank*.

Straight eye for the queer guy



In order to get away from Jake, Star imprudently

Arnold is equally elusive in her representation of queerness. Gender relations constitute one of the film's central themes. Star's numerous encounters with men – from the early scene of her fending off her amorous father (if that's what he is) through her hair-raising brush with a trio of middle-aged cowboys, her encounter with an oilrig operator who pays her \$1,000 in exchange for sexual favors, and the vicissitudes of her tumultuous relationship with Jake – form integral components of this coming-of-age story. In Amanda Greer's opinion, Arnold's finesse in depicting these encounters makes *American Honey* "one of the most sensitive portrayals of female sexuality on-screen":

"Star's sexuality, both as she asserts it and as it's forced out of her by others, has an Alice Munro-esque sensitivity to it; she blurs the line between pleasure and survival in an honest, breathtaking way." [45]

However, while Star's sexual relations with men form the movie's dramatic center

jumps into a convertible with a bunch of middle-aged suburban cowboys.

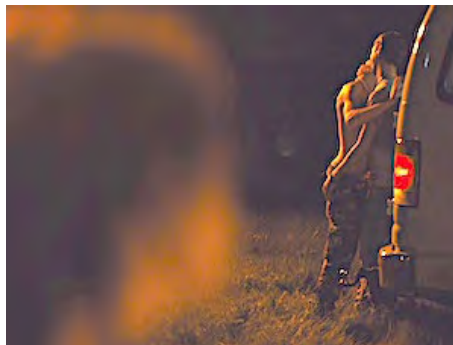


Star's distressing habit of jumping into cars with men recurs throughout the film. Here, she climbs into the back of a pickup truck with a group of oilrig operators in the hope that they will buy magazine subscriptions from her.

of gravity, gay sexuality, which the film weaves into the narrative insistently but with little ado, is so conspicuously undeveloped that this underdevelopment becomes significant in its own right.

The prime of example here is the relationship between JJ (Raymond Coalson) and Riley (Christopher David Wright). Despite Krystal's rule against relationships in the mag crew, numerous crewmembers hook up with each other on the sly. A cut-away shot of Katness (Crystal Ice) straddling one of her male peers on the steps of a motel in the wee hours of the night shows an escapade of this sort. A pan from a bonfire to a view JJ and Riley making out against the side of the van on *Losers' Night* depicts another. Both of these amorous encounters appear in the field of the moving image with little fanfare. Affecting a perspective of observational detachment, the film treats one encounter as no more or less remarkable than the other. However, JJ and Riley's relationship is more than a casual hook-up. In direct contravention of Krystal's policy, the two men form a couple, and they do so openly, in plain sight of the crew. They are unique in this regard. JJ and Riley are the only lovers in the mag crew that are open about their relationship, and nobody seems to care.

It is not only the crewmembers that show little concern for the status of JJ and Riley's relationship. The film does not seem to care either. We learn of the lovers' status incidentally, as the camera follows Star from room to room one night while she looks for Jake. As she shines a flashlight on one bed after another in search of her lover, a point-of-view shot pans from a view of Kalium (Isaiah Stone) asleep on the floor to an image of Riley and JJ lying in bed in each other's arms. Once again, Arnold communicates this narrative information with little to-do, as an unremarkable element of the mise-en-scène, not even worthy of comment.



The camera pans from a bonfire on *Losers' Night* to a view of JJ (Raymond Coalson) and Riley making out against the side of the van.



As Star shines a flashlight on one bed after another in search of Jake, a point-of-view shot pans to an image of Riley and JJ lying in bed in each other's arms.



This nonchalance in depicting gay sexuality is, in turn, extended from Arnold's portrayal of the mag crew to her representation of the larger culture delineated in the film. Although JJ expresses concern that he might "get shot" when he sees all the "redneck trucks" in Williston, North Dakota, his exchange with a driver at a truck stop outside of Williston suggests that he has nothing to fear. "You can help us out with the, you know, the gay club fee and shit," the young salesman says to the trucker. The pitch works: the driver hands over \$20 to the affable teen. JJ's passing comment here, to which the film draws surprisingly little attention, is highly suggestive. A truck stop in rural North Dakota is not the first place one might to think to look for openness and inclusiveness on matters of non-hetero-normative sexuality, nor is it the most obvious location to choose if one were a filmmaker looking for a milieu representative of such attitudes.

"You can help us out with the, you know, the gay club fee and shit," JJ says to a driver at a truck stop outside of Williston, North Dakota.



Director Andrea Arnold's "favorite moment in the film" occurs during a sing-along in the van when QT makes eye contact with Star. "It's a really loving look she gives Star," Arnold asserts. "It's inclusion" (Andrea Arnold, interview with Julia Felsenthal, *Vogue*, Sept. 29, 2016).

Class and culture

The film's intentional downplaying of both racial differences and matters of sexual orientation calls for comment. The movie does not overtly criticize racism or homophobia. Rather, it casts race and sexual preference as non-issues. This approach is far from innocent. It dismisses out of hand the cultural conservatives and members of the radical right for whom these issues are of vital importance. In addition to discriminating against virtually every non-European ethnic group, the alt-right also has a strong homophobic streak.[46] By going out of its way to present race and sexual preference as irrelevant or inconsequential, *American Honey* subtly erodes these cornerstones of the alt-right worldview. Instead of decrying bigotry or denouncing homophobia, Arnold presents a world in which discrimination against people of color and LGBTQ+ folks has no place.

Arnold's vision of a racially and sexually fluid youth culture fairly represents the dominant attitudes of a generation. According to estimates, roughly three-fourths of millennials support gay marriage, and they "are everywhere asserting their right to [...] have all their heritages respected, counted and acknowledged." [47] Presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders famously claimed that millennials are "the least prejudiced generation in the history of the United States." [48] However, as Sanders would be first to acknowledge, they also have the bleakest job prospects of any generation in living memory. The youth unemployment rate in the United States reached a record 19 percent in 2010, the highest it had been since the government started gathering such statistics in 1948. [49] Employment levels for young people have improved since that time, but job prospects for people born after the mid-1980s remain dismal. People who came of age in the twenty-first century work in more part-time, precarious, and low-wage service jobs than their parents and grandparents did, despite the millennials' higher levels of education. [50] *American Honey* gives audio-visual form to both sides of this equation: both to the progressive cultural attitudes of many young people today and to the bleak socio-economic prospects of the millennial generation.

The split between an optimistic view of a generation's cultural attitudes and a pessimistic view of that same generation as a social class, emblemized in the film by an open and inclusive group of young people working in an unregulated subsector of the economy, represents the culmination of half a century of social change. Thomas Frank attributes this change to a conscious decision on the part of the Democratic Party's leadership following the defeat of Democratic presidential nominee Hubert Humphrey in 1968. It is at that time, Frank recounts, that the party started moving as close as it could to the Republican position on economic issues while differentiating itself from its rival party by championing the causes of civil rights, feminism, and the like. [51] The wager was that traditionally Democratic working-class voters would have nowhere else to go. Liberals could undercut the labor movement, bust unions, negotiate trade deals that benefit the multinationals and decimate the local workforce, and still be able to rely on their working-class base for votes. The wager paid off in 1992 and 1996, with the elections of Bill Clinton, and again in 2008 and 2012, with Barack Obama. It was spectacularly lost in 2016, when a buffoonish demagogue doubling as a self-styled billionaire was able to convince a critical mass of the disenchanted electorate that he represented their interests better than the liberal establishment. As the country prepares for a new election pitting the billionaire buffoon against an as-yet undecided Democratic opponent (at the time of writing), we can only hope that the former Party of the People learned a lesson from the debacle of 2016. If Democrats do not commit to addressing the ever-widening gap between the Mission Hills magnates and the rest of the population while continuing to promote a culture of inclusion, the society depicted in *American Honey* might start to look downright utopian compared to the heartland of the future.

Notes

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Animal kingdom: the body politics of *The Favourite*

by [Jamison Kantor](#)

About a month before winning an Academy Award for her astonishing portrayal of Queen Anne (1665-1714), Olivia Colman made it clear that her role in Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Favourite* (2018) was not just an unconventional depiction of an eighteenth-century English leader, but also a biting piece of contemporary political commentary. Addressing a crowd at the Palm Springs Festival, Colman described the queen as “someone in whom resides all the madness, frustration... and instability of a powerful person unfit for the job.”[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Colman, who was speaking to a largely American audience that had themselves been living under a reckless president for almost two years, then quipped, “I don’t know if you know anyone like that.”[2]

Despite the droll quality of her remark, this essay takes seriously Colman’s understanding of *The Favourite* as a reflection on current reactionary political movements across the globe, especially the leaders of those movements. For, while they are “unfit for the job” of managing the liberal institutions on which their countries’ political systems are built, these outlandish, sometimes ludicrous figures are playing a different game, one in which individual expressions of domination license the restoration of a strict social hierarchy. Among its many characteristics, this global reemergence of authoritarianism has accentuated a tenet of conservative ideology that was crucial to its perpetuation from the eighteenth century through today: the ranking of and discrimination between persons at the visceral level of the body. As reactionaries respond to what they see as modest gains in social equality, they seem to abandon the “modern” administrative tactics of persuasion or rationality—even of the most coercive variety—and instead embrace a politics based on a strict taxonomy of physical worthiness and vitality.

But the corporeal power of the conservative figurehead is not literal; it does not mean that the leader has the most formidable body, through which they command the respect of the masses. (In fact, many of these leaders seem to be physically unimpressive.) Instead, the strength of the leader manifests itself through the mythos of their command over the natural world and, by extension, their sovereignty over a host of natural beings that exist to serve them. Indeed, if “nature” has long been a keyword for the conservative desire to constrain social change at any cost, then the conservative figurehead is also the ruler of nature itself, its guiding force, as well as the vessel through which it flows.[3]

In this essay, I contend that Lanthimos’s satiric film dramatizes this political dynamic in two different ways. First, *The Favourite* seems to caricature the ideology of conservative restoration by focusing on a figurehead of the original English Restoration, Queen Anne. One of the period’s later monarchs—and a paragon of its literature and culture—Anne represents in Lanthimos’s portrayal a

Two contemporaneous portraits of Queen Anne of England. On the top, Anne in her younger years, just before she ascended to the throne. An arranged spray of roses and playful spaniel at her heel signal her affinity with a contained, yet robust, natural world. On the bottom, Anne, with a wearier look, represented about a decade before the events depicted in the film.



Eighteenth-century portraits of Abigail Hill and Sarah Churchill, courtiers and confidants to Queen Anne. While *The Favourite*'s costume design seems inspired by these representations, in the film, Abigail and Sarah often appear disheveled in a ludicrous way, not in the "unpremeditated" mode popularized by some portraiture.

grotesque version of "natural sovereignty," with a body that is deteriorating (but also desired by her closest advisers), and a domain that extends over a broad range of human and non-human animals (and, oftentimes, creatures whose existence spans both categories). For Lanthimos, Anne also seems to represent—and to legitimate historically—one of the director's primary cinematic concerns: the animal as a metaphor for kinship and social affiliation, even of the most perverse varieties. However, while *The Favourite* sensationalizes England's original monarchical restoration and the premises of a broader conservative ideology—the rejection of "rational" persuasion in favor of sheer affect and desire; the mythologizing of the sovereign through her supremacy in all realms of life—then the film also comments on our twenty-first-century revival of authoritarian nationalism, many varieties of which have a pseudo-monarchist character. In its second horizon of meaning, then, the film addresses the current political moment through its historical depiction of restoration, attributing to both present and past versions of tyranny a kind of gross, physicalized absurdity.

Popular critics have been split on whether to call the film an accurate period piece or an eccentric, hyper-stylized vision of aristocratic excess, something along the lines of Sophia Coppola's MTV-inspired *Marie Antoinette* (2006) or Baz Luhrmann's quick-cutting, SoCal *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). [4] My reading, however, addresses both interpretations, crediting Lanthimos with an authentic portrayal of eighteenth-century royalist intemperance, as well as modern despotism. Indeed, the genre of the film is similarly debatable: *The Favourite* appears to be at once a picaresque novel adaptation, absurd satire, and melodramatic LGBTQ+ three-hander. In it, a seemingly uncultured (and, in her opening scene, literally muck-covered) ingenue named Abigail Hill (played by Emma Stone), enters Anne's court as a lowly kitchen hand and works her way into the center of the queen's inner circle, relying on a combination of social perception and sexual manipulation to become the handmaiden—and, eventually, lover—of the queen.

Standing in Abigail's way is her own cousin, Anne's long-time adviser and paramour Sarah Churchill (played with Machiavellian relish by Rachel Weisz). Originally the focus of Anne's affections, Sarah wages a proxy battle against Abigail to maintain her place in the court's innermost sanctum, a spatial metaphor for the queen's trust. And yet, as Abigail slowly wins over Anne, she moves closer to the heart of that court, the royal bedroom, while Sarah is pushed further out, eventually ending up in a dank country brothel, a fitting inversion of the sexual power play she has made on the queen. This queer love triangle between Anne, Sarah, and Abigail permits Lanthimos to center the queen's body as the contested territory for political aspiration. While this plot can feel surprisingly modern, as it equates gay eroticism with social-climbing and courtly influence, it also literalizes an older, recurrent dynamic of conservative revival, in which the sentiments, passions, and appetites overtake reason and cerebral cunning.

In other words, by representing both historical and contemporary versions of conservative restoration, *The Favourite* visualizes the clash of two different forms of political power. It reveals a familiar, "modern" form of power based on knowledge, strategy, and the canny manipulation of the interests and needs of others. But, ultimately, the film revels in a revanchist form of power based on the rejection of reason, overt expressions of physical dominance, and an assiduous sorting of bodies, a ranking system that sometimes mimics—but also scrambles—the classic taxonomy between human and non-human animals. [5]

Lanthimos generates this ideological conflict in three ways, which I will address sequentially in this essay. First, through innovative camerawork and production choices, Lanthimos depicts the state as constructed through illicitly-acquired knowledge about subjects and rivals; the director equates authority with

voyeurism and clandestine sight.[6] But other shots—which display all sorts of visceral activity and physical urges—reveal sovereignty as the ability to fulfill (and neglect) carnal instincts and desires, a power that ultimately trumps any information about people or the way they can be manipulated. Next, in keeping with its sensational images, the film demonstrates the power inherent in the physical body of the monarch herself, depicting Anne—a primary figurehead for entailed authority—as a being whose apex physical presence allows her to arbitrate between all creatures, human or otherwise. In turn, Colman’s intensely corporeal portrayal of the Queen seems to evoke the contemporaneous writing on politics and animal nature found in John Locke and Alexander Pope. Finally, in focusing on the body and whimsical desires of the monarch, the film revitalizes the concept of conservative restoration, where certain groups are given arbitrary status because of their bodies, so that other groups who have worked to achieve equality will be forced back into subservience. Like the best satires, the film parodies this method of conservative social engineering so that we take it seriously in our own age.

The view of power

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| <p>Cinematographer Robbie Ryan used a 6mm fisheye lens to warp the view of the landscapes and palace grounds, making the outdoors feel claustrophobic. These curved shots may also imply the political omniscience that the film’s many voyeurs wish to achieve.</p> | |

In *The Favourite*, the screen regularly curves and warps around a single focal point. The 6mm fisheye lens employed by cinematographer Robbie Ryan turns sprawling palatial courtyards and kitchens, symbols for the accumulated decadence of the late English Restoration, into tight pockets of surveillance.[7] In contrast with one of the film’s clearest predecessors, Stanley Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975)—another wry take on eighteenth-century social-climbing—Lanthimos’s vast panoramas of the countryside are claustrophobic, not grand and picturesque.[8]

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A contrast between establishing shots in *The Favourite* and *Barry Lyndon*, a palpable influence on Lanthimos's film. In *Barry Lyndon*, an entrance into the palace conveys broad, boundless opportunity; in *The Favourite*, the palatial grounds offer an enveloping symmetry, where one cannot escape the machinations of rivals.

Other visual tactics have the effect of “folding” characters into their backgrounds. While Ryan uses the wide shot to convey the enormity of royal ballrooms and hallways, he regularly does so with single figures inhabiting the frame. Enveloped by space and decorative patterns, characters sometimes seem to hide within the shot itself, making them agents of clandestine affairs, rather than focal points in a dramatic narrative. However, these compositions can have the opposite effect. By focusing on single characters that seem to be overtaken by their surroundings, Lanthimos places viewers in the position to spot illicit activities and private reactions within the grander context of royal space, where civic decisions are made. Indeed, there are other production choices that place audience members in the role of intimate confidant, much like Sarah and Abigail. Throughout, placards of wry text cut the film into various chapters, mimicking the early printed book and putting viewers into a similar position as the secluded, individual reader. Even the font kerning on the title cards and credits emphasizes isolation, as letters within single words are sometimes stretched apart from one another, split across margins, or placed on entirely different lines.



Ryan also used the fisheye lens to “bend” wide shots of interiors around single bodies, implying the vast space in which characters could hide, as well as the opportunities for espionage, an act in which we are also invited to participate as clandestine viewers.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Given the intimacy politics that drive the narrative of the film—two women vying for the affection and influence of a singular leader—one reading of this visual schema is obvious: in the world of *The Favourite*, people that are disconnected from one another can be controlled through voyeuristic activity. No one—not the scullery maid, or the leaders of an incipient parliament, or the queen herself—is exempt from being watched; strength is knowing what your opponents do in the shadows. This lesson comes into full view in a scene when Abigail, in the middle of her conversion from kitchen-hand to soubrette, watches from the darkness as Anne and Sarah enter the court’s grand library. From the shadows of the upper stacks, with a book in hand, Abigail witnesses Anne in erotic consort with Sarah for the first time. The realization of this same-sex attraction is, of course, pivotal for Abigail’s subsequent manipulation of Anne’s desires and her eventual move to replace Sarah as the younger, fresher lover of the queen.

Despite its unique presentation of a queer scopophilia, the film’s technical and narrative obsession with surveillance seems to reinforce an old line about politics in the modern world (even if Lanthimos’s version of that world—with its decadent wigs, pantomimic painted faces, and open sexual congress—seems distinctly anti-modern and unsubtle): real authority exists in knowing what your subjects want to do, and then to coercing them to do what you want. This coercion happens, among other ways, through the machinations of the bureaucratic state, by subtle architectural control over subjects’ bodies, by establishing media “gateways” that give and withhold information from those subjects, or by determining the rigid perimeters of normative sexuality. Extended to an entire nation, these forms of control establish what Michel Foucault called “power/knowledge,” a phenomenon affiliated with the age of Enlightenment, in which people are coordinated through assiduous information-gathering and documentation, instead of threats of overt violence or physical harm.[9] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] According to Foucault, this apparatus of control was predicated on the emergence of the bourgeoisie as the hegemonic class: “[a] people’s court made it possible to break the monopoly on information” and distribute it broadly.[10] Presumably, Abigail understands this kind of power/knowledge when she pulls a book to learn about Anne’s court and its culture, or, when she attempts to set up elaborate triangles between people, positioning courtiers throughout the halls of the court and clearing space for her to access the queen’s affections. For, while the film takes place during the early days of the Enlightenment era, it is also a post-Baconian world, where intelligence-gathering and empirical knowledge started to impact statecraft. In her own right, Abigail seems to mimic the scrappy, self-motivated proto-bourgeois subject of the eighteenth-century novels that will come to characterize the age’s literature.

The library scene does not merely signify the emergence of power/knowledge in the eighteenth century or preempt Foucault’s infamous “eye of power,” the omniscience of the bourgeois intelligence apparatus.[11] Lanthimos also says something about voyeurism itself and the way that it encodes certain, forbidden registers of knowledge, either about oneself or the thing being viewed. Obviously, Abigail’s scopophilic voyeurism turns the traditional, heterosexual subject on its head.[12] The scene takes place between three women and, rather than register as an incident that occurs outside of the film’s narrative, involves a—perhaps *the*—major event of the story. (This intimate exchange contrasts with Abigail’s visual contempt for almost every male figure in the film). Less obvious, however, is the way that Abigail’s voyeurism distorts traditional forms of knowledge themselves.



At one point, Abigail bashes herself in the face with a book, hoping that her injuries will inspire Anne's sympathy. Here, Lanthimos converts the book, an object of knowledge, into an object of brute force. But Abigail is still a savvy manipulator of representations. She checks herself out with a hand mirror to make sure that her injury will have the right effect.



After recuperating in a country brothel, Sarah returns to court with a lacy eye-patch. The patch could signal the partial loss of Sarah's primary strategic sense, sight and visual information; alternatively, the lacy garment could represent the triumph of external, corporeal seductions over internal, intelligence-driven manipulations.



By having Abigail put down her book—an illicit form of information for a servant to have—only to replace it with an erotic gaze from the shadows, Lanthimos hints that political strategy and positioning is based less on gaining clandestine information about people than it is on establishing intimate physical or affective sensations between them.[13] Raw, corporeal desire cannot be disentangled from forbidden intelligence-gathering.

In other words, although *The Favourite* seems to visualize the modern dynamics of power—through its scheming, furtive protagonists and its voyeuristic cinematography—it also says something quite different and, perhaps, anti-modern about politics in the emerging Enlightenment (and in our own era, if we accept the film as an allegory for contemporary authoritarianism). Power, Lanthimos reveals, ultimately does not reside in one's knowledge about others or its skillful deployment, nor is it exemplified by cunning figures like Abigail, who can at times evoke the early Enlightenment and its elevation of reason. Instead, it originates from embodied authority and derives from the capacity to submit others to your physical presence, even if that presence is, as in Colman's depiction of Anne, wracked by illness and incapacitated by disability. Abigail seems to learn this lesson later when, in order to drum up sympathy from Anne, she intentionally injures herself with the volume plucked from the library. At this point, the printed book is neither an instrument for intellectual enrichment nor something that can be disregarded in favor of more direct, visual pleasure. Instead, it is a blunt-force object used to affect the body directly.

As tensions escalate between Sarah and Abigail, their confrontation becomes even more physical; what started with subtle maneuverings and verbal slights devolves into attempts at outright physical harm. Hoping to remove Sarah from the Queen's retinue permanently, Abigail spikes the adviser's tea with some toxic herbs, which causes Sarah to fall from her horse, who drags her in-harness. After recuperating in a brothel, Sarah returns to court with a thin lace scarf tied across her left eye, hiding an injury or, perhaps, a scar. Ever watchful and calculating, Sarah now has only half of her visual faculties to outsmart her rival; the adviser's own "eye of power" has been covered by a delicate, even amatory, garment. Here, vision—and the internalization of knowledge through sight—is supplanted by a piece of clothing that suggests the idea of the body as an erotic surface. Although it appears absurd, like a swashbuckler's undergarment, the makeshift eyepatch literalizes the substitution of influence acquired by sight/insight with influence gained through outward physical coercion.

Given the way that the film visualizes these two forms of politics—a politics based on conspiracies of knowledge acquired through vision, and a highly physicalized politics premised on scopophilic desire—we might reconsider the meaning of the fisheye lens, a device used in a prolific number of shots. The lens could mimic the all-seeing eye of the surveillance camera. When Lanthimos incorporates the viewpoint of a contemporary technology that implies omniscience, the overt artifice of early-eighteenth-century surfaces—the exaggerated face paint, the over-accumulated feasting tables—are cut with a kind of grotesque *verite*. But these shots can also exemplify something more primal: the point of view of a ravenous animal, the peripheral mastery of the swooping eagle, or the hungry wolf, ready to devour its prey.

The body of power



Lanthimos's previous films reveal the director's fascination with anthropomorphism and the muddling of traits between human and non-human animals. In *Dogtooth* (top) a tyrannical father trains his children to behave like attack dogs. In *The Lobster* (below) a potential couple bonds near a natural blind in the woods.



Lanthimos portrays Queen Anne as disabled. Gout impedes her mobility so much that she must use a wheelchair. Nevertheless, she represents England's absolute monarchy and parliament must come to her.



In fact, if there is a subtext to the film's courtier drama, it is the assertion and domination of animal bodies, human and non-human alike, as a kind of politics. Lanthimos is no stranger to this thematic. Critical to the medical drama at the center of his previous film, the aptly titled *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), the animal (or animalistic) body is an even more overt symbol in *The Lobster* (2015). Here, in an almost literal representation of the Darwinian order, Lanthimos depicts a hotel where desperate, lovelorn individuals must pair up and copulate within a certain amount of time or they are turned into an animal and sent out to live in the woods. Acting as a broader investigation of the burdens of desire, *The Lobster* represents the idea of contemporary social devolution through its fixation on bodies under pressure, a focus that, as Angelos Koutsourakis explains, likely comes from Lanthimos's background in performance art.[14] According to Koutsourakis, who focuses on the director's second film *Dogtooth* (2009), Lanthimos's work stands as a definitive example of Deleuze's "cinema of the body," where a film prioritizes performative activity over narrative or representational structures, allowing its characters to steadily disavow their distinctive, bourgeois identities.[15]

If she adds a historical dimension to Lanthimos's cinematic fascination with human and non-human animals, Anne also exists as the most captivating character in *The Favourite*. Plagued by gout and later displaying signs of a stroke, her body is not vigorous or fertile. Indeed, it deteriorates from scene to scene. However, unlike the characters in *The Lobster*, who must reproduce under threat of transformation and social expulsion, or *Dogtooth*, where characters' bodies are consistently de-individualized to signal their "dependence on broader social structures," Anne is the head of an entire polis.[16] What her body lacks in actual vigor, it gains through the aura of monarchy and the way that the monarch compresses the natural and the civic worlds into one. As a classic example of the pre-modern sovereign, Anne represents simultaneously the "body politic" and the "body natural;" both Abigail and Sarah respond in this way to her, conflating their physical lust for the queen with their yearning for her authority.[17] However, in Ernst Kantorowicz's original theory of the king's two bodies, the physical form was transient, a mere vessel for the divine operations of the crown, where "[t]he migration of the 'Soul'...from one incarnation to another.....conveys 'immortality' to the individual king as King." [18] *The Favourite* seems to avoid bestowing Anne with any metaphysical claim to kingship. Instead, Lanthimos argues that Anne's body—depicted throughout the film as both excessive and deteriorating—is the primary thing that gives her authority.

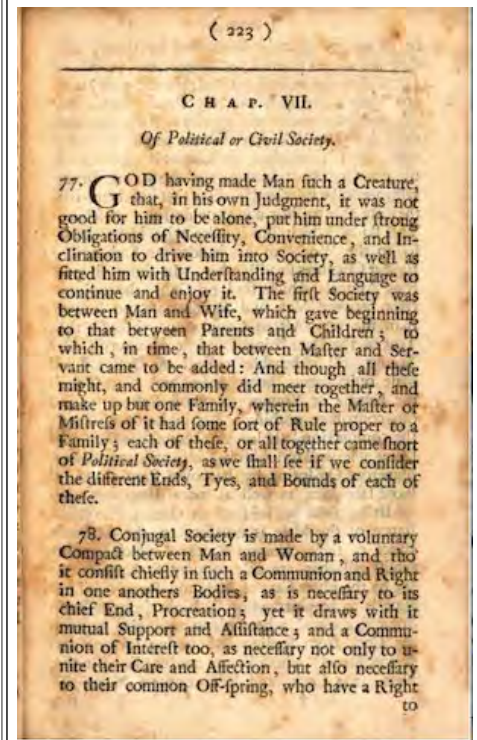
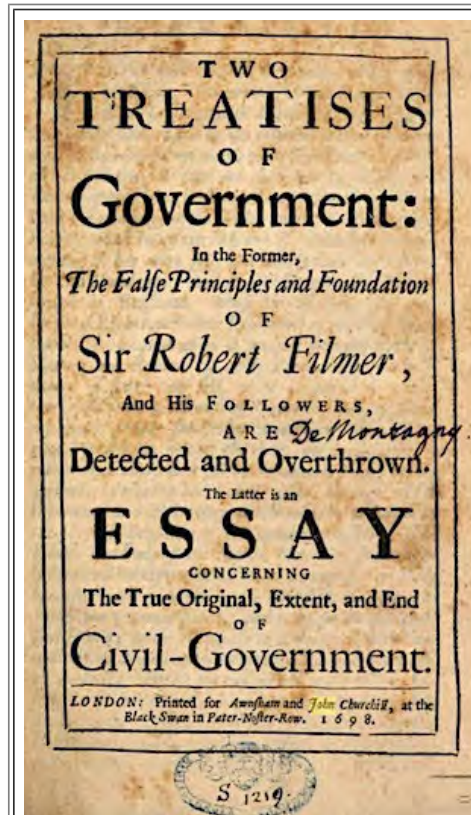
Indeed, Anne seems to be aware that she may be the final vessel for this version of monarchy and, hence, that her status as the head of state is hyper-material. In turn, her authority must be secured by bouts of action, performed despite her physical limitations. In one scene, for instance, Anne instructs Sarah to "go fast" down the hallways when she is wheelchair-bound. While this is a bit of good fun between two lovers, here, Anne also converts a loyal subject into a prosthetic extension of the self. In another scene, Anne harnesses herself up like a horse so that, in a simulation of equine virility, she can ride across the palace grounds. And, in one of the film's most visceral moments, the queen gorges herself on cake, vomits into a pitcher, and gorges some more.

Exhibiting symptoms of gout (a condition affiliated with overly-rich cuisine and, hence, the diets of the nobility) and regularly commanding servants through big gestures and howls of pain, Anne seems to scramble the taxonomic-status of the human, or dominant animal, with the non-human animal. Indeed, this division was critical to the civic philosophy that emerged in her era, the turn of the eighteenth century. In his *First Treatise on Government* (1689), Locke argues that humans are a special category of animal: they may have "dominion over every

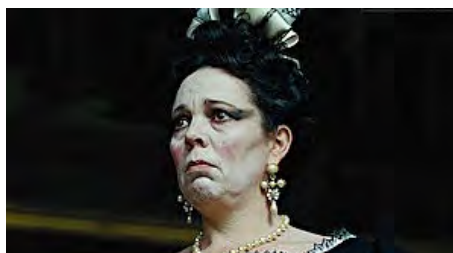


Sarah outfits Anne with a riding harness. The film occasionally incorporates BDSM imagery, which parallels its depiction of the rituals of political dominance.

living thing that moveth on the earth” but they have “no monarchical power over those of [their] own species.”[19] According to Heather Keenleyside, in Locke’s text, the human exists as the “creature who speaks and cannot be eaten,” beings that have the capability for representation—both political and linguistic—and are not driven merely by instinct or hierarchy.[20] But, as the film’s exemplar of ultimate monarchical authority, Anne scrambles Locke’s distinction: she asserts her dominion over others because she eats and, sometimes, cannot speak. Her occasional regressions into a fully “naturalized” being disorganizes Locke’s distinctions of sovereignty between humans and non-humans. Although many of these moments can read as deeply personal glimpses into the inner life of a deteriorating monarch (and monarchy), they also satirize the very basis for her reign, the Queen’s transcendence of the corporeal world and, by extension, humanity’s ascension beyond natural hierarchies.



A title and chapter page from John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*. In blurring the boundaries between human and non-human within a story about internecine political struggle, *The Favourite* evokes Locke’s construction of an early liberalism—and reformed monarchism—established in part through a divine animal taxonomy.



Anne is the film’s case study in “reverse-anthropomorphism,” where non-human animal characteristics are attributed to humans. In smudged makeup, Anne is told that she resembles a badger; during an attack of gout, she howls in pain, splayed



out on the floor; flecked with horsehair, even her most impressive royal garments resemble a spotted pelt

Instead of offering broad proclamations or delivering public speeches, the queen's methods of governance suggest a social order that is pre-linguistic, one that has been built on sheer physical magnitude or animal power. While Colman conveys a politics of animalism through her performative gestures, she also wears highly symbolic clothing—such as her royal mantel, a garment flecked with tufts of horsehair—and is done up in makeup that, as Sarah points out early in the film, makes her look like a badger. Lanthimos includes a variety of actual non-human animals in his film, too. One parliamentary lord, compelled to curry favor with the crown in regular palace sessions, takes walks in the park with a dapper duck at his side, implying an equality between governance and trained fowl. Abigail and Sarah trade verbal barbs and engage in their war of position against one another while blasting captured grouse out of the sky like skeet. And the palace's mid-afternoon entertainment involves members of government throwing ripe fruit at a portly, naked man who struts back and forth like a chicken. Hallmarks of Lanthimos's surrealism, these moments establish a motif in which the film's satire is rooted. Social arrangements that are meant to convey the emergence of a complex dance of civic interest are made into retrograde contests of dominance. The results are humans that are covered in mud, blood, and pulp.



A palace game involves hurling fruit at naked men. A pre-modern punishment for legal infractions, here the act doubles as a grotesque form of play.



Lanthimos personifies non-human animals as entities involved in competitions and strategic games, here with racing ducks. On the other hand, his film sometimes depicts humans as wholly visceral, or instinctual creatures.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Abigail strikes a beastly pose in one of her first scenes in the palace. Note the letter of recommendation in her hand, a document that, in contrast to her primitive grimace, implies Abigail's strategic abilities.

This intentional jumble of the “chaotic” natural environments with the “orderly” spaces and rituals of aristocracy also implies a kind of anthropological breakdown of the borders between civilization and wilderness, where struggles between human and non-human animals become indistinguishable from one another. Of course, Anne is the central figure in this arrangement. At the top of her kingdom, she is also a “queen of the forest,” bringing the natural environment indoors in an attempt to master and control it. Her acceptance of a muddy Abigail, who mimics a snarling bear when she enters the palace for the first time, corresponds with the decorations of Anne’s bedroom, a space covered in vine-laden tapestries and pastoral scenes, images stacked on images, as if representation itself could reproduce organically. The final shot of the film repeats this visual technique. It is a triple exposure that overlays a profile of the queen, a shot of Abigail submitting to her authority, and a closeup of scurrying rabbits.



The palace interiors—especially Anne’s bedroom—are covered, top to bottom, in natural representations and pastoral scenes. Alexander Pope, one of Anne's contemporaries, depicted the queen as Diana, or the mythic guardian of the forest.



In her bedroom, the queen keeps rabbits that function like her lost children.



The final shot of the film is a triple exposure featuring Anne looking up, Abigail looking down, and Anne’s rabbits skittering on the floor. To the end, Anne maintains a “primal power” over her lady-in-waiting.

Once again, these details have some foundation in eighteenth-century culture. As Tobias Meneley points out in his reading of Alexander Pope’s *Windsor Forest* (1713), a poem dedicated to Anne and her leadership, the Queen was celebrated by the era’s cultural figures as a mythic huntress, or Diana, who “inaugurated a period of ‘Golden Days’” in England by expanding its “royal hunting grounds” through imperial conquest and diplomacy with other nations.[21] [\[open endnotes in new page\]](#) As “[t]h’ immortal huntress,” Anne, in Pope’s words, “protects the sylvan reign,” and stands in “Earth’s fair light...Empress of the main.”[22] According to Meneley, the Anne of *Windsor Forest* also presides over the “field sports” of the country’s freemen, who experience her sovereignty vicariously in their freedom to trek across and control land. [23] But in Lanthimos’s portrayal, Anne rarely goes outside and must have nature brought to her, inverting Pope’s interpretation of the queen. Even when characters interact outdoors, the camera makes the spaces in which they appear restrictive and claustrophobic, locations rife with antagonists. Unlike the swains in *Windsor Forest*, who “range the hills, the gameful woods beset, / Wind the shrill horn, or spread the waving net,” all bodies here must be managed and disciplined.[24]



On the left, Alexander Pope and his dog, painted a few years after the publication of his *Windsor Forest*, a long poem that celebrates Anne's reign. On the right, the frontispiece to an early-eighteenth-century edition of *Windsor Forest*. Windsor Castle rises behind the idyllic foreground, a prelapsarian scene of bathing women who are incorporated into their environment almost totally.



Abigail has a tea party with Anne and her 17 rabbit "children." The carrot cake in the background is, presumably, a type of food that both human and bunny can enjoy.

Along with his Dianic appraisal of the "great ANNA," Pope describes the monarch as a "chaste...Queen" with a "virgin train." [25] Given the carnal rivalries that drive the narrative in *The Favourite*—especially its love triangle, the thing on which Deborah Davis's and Tony McNamara's screenplay concentrates—Pope's mythologizing of Anne's life may be another cultural representation parodied by the film. And yet, there are some details that remain faithful to the pastoral vision in *Windsor Forest*, at least obliquely. Anne, who historically died without issue, keeps 17 rabbits in her bedroom, creatures that stand-in for each of her deceased children. As "heirs" to the Stuart line, Anne's pets provide Lanthimos another opportunity to indict aristocracy: a cliché of a fertile animal, rabbits will never be able to carry on the queen's legacy. Of course, the irony only goes so far. Aside from the real pain that Anne feels for the loss of so many children—heartache that has been transferred into her stewardship of domestic animals—the end of her lineage could have world-historical implications. As Davis reveals, her original script (titled *Balance of Power*) concerned England's shift from "a despotic monarchy to a constitutional monarch." [26] While the film that eventually made it to screen shows the rise of such constitutionalism, with advisers and parliamentary lords squabbling for influence around the fading sovereign, Anne's despotism oftentimes expresses itself as a dominion over all of the organic life that can be contained within the walls of the palace. If rabbits are allowed to hop around the bedroom, then food piles up on the palace's feasting tables and fresh flowers crest over wood credenzas and across the dance hall, demonstrating the abundance of her kingdom. Of course, when Abigail threatens one of her animal children in the final scene, a sickly Anne reasserts herself as the apex creature, physically pushing Abigail to the floor and standing over her. Here, Lanthimos

seems to convert Pope's vision of the queen as responsible steward of nature into a figure whose struggle to keep hold of her crown—or the very idea of the crown—manifests as a gross display of authority over every living thing.



Food—what is eaten and who eats it—is a central motif in the film. Despite the clear hierarchy established in this shot between human and non-human animal, a table-spread also features a cooked deer mingled with edible fruits and vegetation, implying an upheaval in the natural order of things



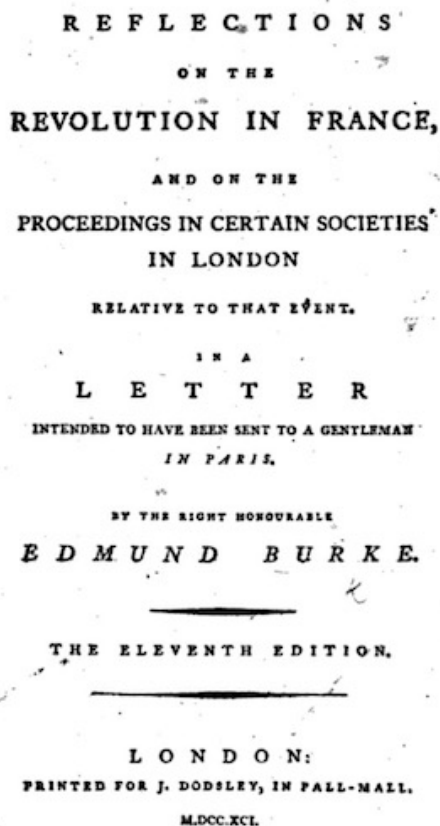
A historical rendering of Anne signing the 1707 Acts of Union, which united England and Scotland under one legislative body. Presaging many of the shots in the film, Anne is surrounded on all sides by mp's, who seem to be closing-in on her, muffling her authority. Note the two ladies in waiting, who resemble Abigail and Sarah (although the image does not confirm this).

To put this another way, the politics of the film synthesize Davis's interpretation of shifting English civic sovereignty with Lanthimos's esoteric interest in the animal body and the excesses of organic life. Here, two rival political philosophies of the English Restoration feature on screen: an incipient republicanism—what political historian J.G.A. Pocock says arises with a “Whig oligarchy” licensed by the “Hanoverian succession” of 1714, the year in which Lanthimos's film ends—and absolute monarchy.[27] This ideological contest appears as a divide between rhetorical persuasion and sheer physical dominance, with the devious strategists such as Sarah, Abigail, and a Parliamentary clique pitted against the queen and her unassailable animal body. And, although *The Favourite* hints at Anne's tragic fall, when the final credits roll, she is, quite literally, still standing. Encapsulating the conflict between the strategists who attempt to manipulate the queen and the utter corporeal supremacy of her position, Anne says, when presented with a couple of lobsters, “I thought we could race them and then eat them.”





The restoration of power



Peter Bradshaw has called *The Favourite* a “punk” version of Restoration drama. [28] It is cinema that reminds us of the nasty, brutish, and gross qualities of the royals, not their typical portrayal as sentimental, mawkish, or even silly creatures. But, while it gets some punk cred by disobeying the usual aesthetics of the blue-blood period piece, the film nevertheless remains a canny take on conservatism, not its subversion. Here, Lanthimos reminds us that to be a true conservative—a believer in entailed authority, social hierarchy, and illusory phenomena that exist beyond all reason—is to imagine that one has the license to do anything merely because the body you inhabit has priority over others. [29]

In this way, the film is not just a satire of a longstanding civic ideology, but a commentary on global politics right now. Presently, numerous modern democracies have been shaken by authoritarian figures that, regardless of their crudeness, amorality, or excesses, promise to restore an old, steady order. While the classic definition of conservatism holds that it is an attempt to attenuate progress—not to impede it altogether or to roll it back—this current movement reveals what has always been one of conservatism’s founding principles: the reinstatement of a rigid system of classification between bodies, especially after successful public campaigns for equality, or campaigns that are on the doorstep of success. This is why political theorist Corey Robin calls the primary goal of conservatism “recovery and restoration,” instead of “preservation and protection.” [30] Its adherents aim to resurrect a state where “men are [seen to be] naturally unequal,” even when they showcase their merits or talents. [31]

The Favourite exemplifies this principle by representing the final days of one of the original monarchic restorations as a sequence of rituals premised on physical subjugation, where, in the end, skill and shrewd manipulation simply do not matter. Indeed, among many of its provocative anachronisms, the film suggests that conservatism emerges 75 years before it was articulated by European counterrevolutionaries, such as Joseph De Maistre and the predominant voice for English conservatism, Edmund Burke. Of note here is Burke’s famous claim about the irreverent Jacobins and their levelling philosophy: “On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order.” [32] Recalling the civic philosophy of the original English revolution—around which circulated Locke’s theories of hierarchy and sovereignty—Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* frames conservative renewal as a rejection of the egalitarian “theory” of the

CONSIDERATIONS S U R LA FRANCE.

Dasneigitur hoc nobis, Deorum immortalium natura,
ratione, potestate, mente, numine, sive quod est
affud verbum quo planius significem quod volo, na-
turam omnem divinitus regi? Nam si hoc non pro-
bas, à Deo nobis causa ordiendâ est potissimum.

Cic. de Leg. I. 18.

par M. de Maistre



L O N D R E S.

AVANT 1797.

The title pages for two origin texts of political conservatism: Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Joseph de Maistre's *Considerations on France*, both reactions to the French Revolution, which took place generations after Anne's reign.

revolutionaries and a reclamation of venerable institutions, “embodied” as they are by certain, select individuals.[33] The Jacobin nation demonstrates the “wrong” kind of nature; it will be animalistic, “gross, stupid, [and] ferocious.”[34] The inherited system, however, represents nature that has been tamed and civilized, draped in “the wardrobe of a moral imagination.”[35]

One of the savvier aspects of the film, then, is that it exposes the Burkean language of purity and ethical renewal as a mere cover for uglier motivations. It reveals that an “embodied” restoration can be equally “gross...[and] ferocious” in its attempts to put certain people back in charge, simply because they were in charge before.[36] In the case of the United States (and, perhaps, Brazil and India, both undergoing their own authoritarian revivals), such moments of restoration are typically framed in ethno-religious terms. “For the most ardent elements in [this] ‘coalition of restoration,’” says longtime U.S. politics journalist Ronald Brownstein, are “voters who are resistant to demographic change.”[37] The “backward-facing promise” of ethnic supremacy can be laundered through scripture as its adherents are also, purportedly, among the country’s most religious citizens.[38]

While these tactics are not new, what is perhaps novel about the current situation is the elimination of any ethical pretense for the restoration, Burke’s “moral imagination.” This time, the attempt to recover a fantastical, pre-modern civic life does not feature a strong moral iconology that popular culture can reflect, as in, say, Peter Jackson’s *The Return of the King* (2003). In that film, the conflict between the champions of light and their howling orc adversaries could stand as a metaphor for the neoconservative’s global “coalition of the willing,” and their decision to split the world into “good guys” and “axes of evil.”[39]Currently, though, there is no Manichean moral logic—however childish—onto which the acts of, for example, the previous U.S. administration can be mapped. To paraphrase a recent piece on the state of its governance, the amorality is the point; the point is the assertion of power through the meticulous separation of bodies from one another without even the pretense of virtue.[40]

The Favourite’s depiction of a restored ruling order based on sheer, physical hierarchy appears to make it one of the early cinematic touchstones of twenty-first-century global autocracy. (It’s also an indication of why T.V. shows such as *House of Cards* [2013-8] already feel dated: aside from the fact that members of the previous U.S. executive were regularly more outlandish than the Underwood gang, the president rarely even attempted to manipulate public opinion, perhaps the hallmark of civic modernity, in any serious way). Magnified by Lanthimos’s film, the idea of the animal or the animalistic became the first principle of governance, where one ruled by instinct, projected “strength” through physical posturing, and organized society based on taxonomic ranking. Along with the eugenic connotations of the 45th U.S. president’s fascination with “good genes,” one also notes how often he compared his opponents to “dogs,” or claimed that they had been humiliated “like dogs.”[41] His preferred method of classification is to brand people as humans, non-humans, and superhumans.



Through its imagery, *The Favourite* reveals our new revanchist politics rooted in a history of sovereign power. If Peter Jackson's *The Return of the King* (above) reflected the black-and-white moralism of Bush-era colonization....



... and Beau Willimon's Netflix series *House of Cards* (above) offered the pat Machiavellianism of Beltway insidership



...then *The Favourite* illustrates a conservative politics of sheer, physicalized hierarchy.

However, what completes the film's satire is its allegorizing of a new arrangement of power through an old one. Following this logic, Sarah appears simultaneously as the conventional "evil counselor" of Restoration drama, pulling the sovereign's strings, and a longtime inside-player in the halls of power. Abigail, on the other hand, might represent the picaresque upstart of a variety of Augustan-era fictions, as well as the current, telegenic sycophants who orbit executive power. Perhaps, like Abigail, whose family has fallen from prominence before the film begins, these hangers-on act to recover what they believe is a complete loss of social status among "the elites," even if it means appearing clownish, as the one-time serving girl does in a closing scene of drunken revelry. But neither type of adviser can control the regime in the end. They are fundamentally different from the singular executive and the primal register through which it legitimates itself. They may have arguments, discourse, and persuasion, but the sovereign will always have the apex body, no matter how diminished it becomes.[42]



By the end of the film, Abigail, once a striving proto-bourgeois subject, has succumbed to decadence. Her painted face and insatiable appetites mimic Anne, over whom, Lanthimos suggests, she has attempted to gain complete influence.

And yet, while *The Favourite* presents a retrograde politics founded on physical hierarchy, it can also be surprisingly progressive. The film equates the pursuit of political power with queer desire; it makes civic life the actual—not merely symbolic—domain of non-human animals, beings that cannot always be subjugated or dismissed by humanity; and it recognizes Anne's disabilities

without turning them into an outlet for superhuman gifts. At its most effective, the film undercuts even its own grisly depiction of despotism. Lanthimos's interpretation of the ugly restoration we are living through contains some of the best retorts to its beastliness.[43]

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Notes

Acknowledgements: Thanks to my readers at *Jump Cut* for their helpful, insightful commentary on an earlier version of this essay. Thanks also to Charles Kantor, with whom I first saw *The Favourite*. After the credit roll, we immediately started discussing its politics.

1. Colman is quoted in Malina Saval, "Olivia Colman Compares Donald Trump to the 'Madness ... and Instability' of Queen Anne," *Variety.com* (January 4, 2019): <https://variety.com/2019/scene/awards/olivia-colman-donald-trump-palm-springs-the-favourite-1203099226/>. [return to page 1]

2. Ibid.

3. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1983). "Nature" might be one of the most complex terms in Williams's *Keywords*. However, early in his entry, Williams invokes Burke, one of the originators of political conservatism, to provide a definition of nature as "an essential quality and characteristic of human beings to do something," a fixed core of humanity that rejects constructivism and external social engineering (220). See also J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985). The idea of nature as a *telos* from which humanity cannot depart underpins a theory of eighteenth-century civic virtue. According to J.G.A. Pocock, by the late seventeenth century, prominent Whigs—proponents of "active self-rule"—had accepted and internalized these preconditions and restrictions as the companion to liberty" (41).

4. For the film as a depiction of historical events, see Justin Kirkland, "The Lesbian Storyline in *The Favourite* Is Rooted in Fact," *Esquire.com* (February 24, 2019): <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a26254343/the-favourite-true-story-queen-anne-explained/>; for the garish and odd style of the film, see Eliza Brooke, "The Strange, Beautiful, Gross Aesthetic of *The Favourite*," *Vox.com* (February 21, 2019): <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/2/21/18233815/favourite-oscar-visual-costumes-makeup-cake>.

5. See David Marno, "Center Court," *The L.A. Review of Books* (December 28, 2018): <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/center-court>. Marno reads the politics of the film in almost the opposite way that I do, as a film that "remind[s] us that the court is not a primitive version of modern political power but an altogether different institution, one that grounds power in the sovereign's body." I claim that the film stages the current rebirth of this very principle—even to the level of its "primitive" iconography and practices.

6. For an early modern example of the state designed around empirical knowledge—and employing spies to gather it—see Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1626), in Francis Bacon and Thomas Campanella, *The New Atlantis and The City of the*

Sun: Two Classic Utopias (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), esp. 38-9. "For the several employments and offices of our fellows," says a rector of Bacon's powerful Solomon House, "we have twelve that sail into foreign countries under the names of other nations (for our own we conceal), who bring us the books and abstracts, and patterns of experiments of all other parts" (38). See also Frederick G. Whelan, *Hume and Machiavelli: Political Realism and Liberal Thought* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 284.

7. Cinematographer Robbie Ryan and his technical choices are mentioned in Chris O'Falt, "'The Favourite': Oscar Nod Likely for DP Robbie Ryan, But Damned If He Knows Why," *Indiewire.com* (December 12, 2018): <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/12/the-favourite-cinematographer-robbie-ryan-yorgos-lanthimos-1202027430/>.

8. This is not to say that the static, picturesque images in Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* are uninteresting. Critics regularly point to the tension that the film establishes between narrative—or historical—forward motion and the inertia produced by the cultural rituals and aristocratic conventions in which Lyndon participates, an inertia typified by the still shot. For example, see J.P. Telotte, "The Organic Narrative: Word and Image in *Barry Lyndon*," *Film Criticism* 3.3 (1979): 18-31.

9. See Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 27, 218. "...[P]ower and knowledge directly imply one another," says Foucault, "...there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (27). [\[return to page 2\]](#)

10. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 34. For Foucault, modern power/knowledge, or *pouvoir-savoir* (233), takes two shapes, "the power of knowledge of the truth and the power to disseminate this knowledge" (34).

11. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 146-65.

12. I am thinking of Laura Mulvey's classic claim that cinematic voyeurism takes place between men and women, binary subjects that constitute one another. See Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, vol. 16, No.3 (1975), 6-18. For a queering of this concept—and a retort to Mulvey's idea of "sadistic" voyeurism—see Barbara Mennel, *The Representation of Masochism and Queer Desire in Film and Literature*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 154-7.

13. ---

14. Angelos Koutsourakis, "Cinema of the Body," *Cinema*, vol. 3 (2012), 84-108, 99.

15. Koutsourakis, "Cinema of the Body," 85, 95.

16. Koutsourakis, "Cinema of the Body," 96.

17. For the split between the king's "body natural" and "body politic" in medieval political theory, see Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2016), 7-23.

18. Kantorowicz, *King's Two Bodies*, 13.

19. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 161.

20. Heather Keenleyside, *Animals and Other People: Literary Forms and Living Beings in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 18.
21. Tobias Meneley, *The Animal Claim: Sensibility and the Creaturely Voice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 99. [[return to page 3](#)]
22. Alexander Pope, *Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 24-5.
23. Meneley, *The Animal Claim*, 99.
24. Pope, *Selected Poetry*, 23.
25. Pope, *Selected Poetry*, 29, 24.
26. Davis is quoted in Matt Grober, "Screenwriters Deborah Davis & Tony McNamara Break Down Their Long, Gratifying Journeys With 'The Favourite,'" *Deadline.com* (January 13, 2019): <https://deadline.com/2019/01/the-favourite-deborah-davis-tony-mcnamara-oscars-screenwriting-interview-1202520990/>.
27. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 239.
28. Peter Bradshaw, "The Favourite Review," *The Guardian* (August 30, 2018): <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/aug/30/the-favourite-review-olivia-colman-yorgos-lanthimos>.
29. I associate these "original" conservative qualities with Edmund Burke's defense of European constitutional monarchy in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Especially relevant are Burke's thoughts on the supernatural qualities of the French Revolution. Despite chiding the revolutionaries for operating on the principle of "speculation"—and going beyond the bounds of known systems of practices—Burke locates the strength of the old regime in its ability to produce "pleasing illusions" that would soften and restrain the population (114). See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: J. Dodsley, 1791), throughout. See also Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 70-1.
30. Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, 56.
31. Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, 194.
32. Burke, *Reflections*, 114.
33. Burke, *Reflections*, 255, 115.
34. Burke, *Reflections*, 118.
35. Burke, *Reflections*, 114.
36. Burke, *Reflections*, 115, 118.
37. Ronald Brownstein, "Donald Trump's Coalition of Restoration," *The Atlantic* (June 23, 2016): <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/06/donald-trumps-coalition-of-restoration/488345/>.
38. Ronald Brownstein, "America, a Year Later," *State Magazine* (November 2017): <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2017/politics/state/2016-election-anniversary/>.
39. For the black-and-white thinking that legitimated the Iraq war, see "Remarks

by Donald Rumsfeld at the 2005 Washington Conference on the Americas,” (May 3, 2005), transcript: <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/remarks-donald-rumsfeld-2005-washington-conference-americas>. George W. Bush used the phrase “axis of evil” for the first time in his 2002 state of the union. See “President Delivers State of the Union Address” (January 29, 2002), transcript: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>. He used the phrase “coalition of the willing” later that year, in a speech at a NATO summit in Prague. See “Bush: Join ‘coalition of willing,’” *CNN.com* (November 20, 2002): <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/europe/11/20/prague.bush.nato/>.

40. See Adam Serwer, “The Cruelty is the Point,” *The Atlantic* (October 3, 2018): <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/the-cruelty-is-the-point/572104/>. “It is that cruelty,” says Serwer, “and the delight it brings them, that binds [the president’s] most ardent supporters to him, in shared scorn for those they hate and fear: immigrants, black voters, feminists, and treasonous white men who empathize with any of those who would steal their birthright.”

41. For a searchable repository of all of the 45th U.S. President’s tweets, see “Trump Twitter Archive,” <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>, visited July 2019.

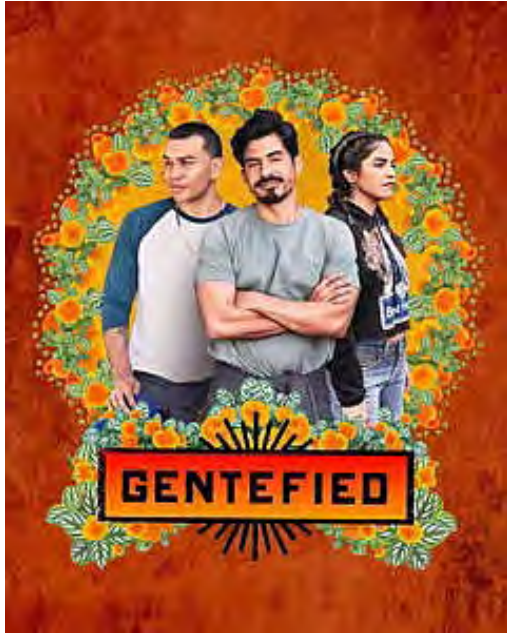
42. There is another allegory of modernity here. Even though Anne could represent a revanchist government premised on restoring strict social hierarchy, she might also symbolize the modern political shift away from edicts and laws and towards the overt control of bodies. In other words, she may be a consummate representation of, as Cary Wolfe has shown, a *polis* centered on biopolitics instead of sovereignty (24). Invested in the relationship between non-human animals and political subjectivity, Wolfe’s scholarship also clarifies, among other aspects, the film’s culinary motifs. Known for her unrestrained diet, Anne illustrates the “carnophallogocentrism” reserved for a head of state, the one who can eat anything they want and, by extension, exerts ultimate authority over others (95). See Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

43. In her review of *The Favourite*, Namwali Serpell also sees the film’s complex representation of “beasts” and humans as licensing a “complex, contradictory” feminism affiliated with “real women.” See Namwali Serpell, “Beastly: The Bad Women of *The Favourite*,” *New York Review of Books* (December 9, 2018): <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/12/09/beastly-the-bad-women-of-the-favourite/>.



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Promotional poster of *Gentefied* with the three Morales cousins (left to right), Erik (Joseph Julian Soria), Chris (Carlos Santos), and Ana (Kerri Martin).

"Beautifully represented" or
an attack on our culture?
Netflix's *Gentefied* and
the struggle over Latinidad/es

by [Richard Mwakasege-Minaya](#) and [Juri Sanchez](#)

The day Netflix released *Gentefied* (2020-), February 21 of 2020, user @juliexplores, a Latina fan of the show, tweeted,



Just as this viewer had done, Latinxs gave rave reviews of the show.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Working-class, LGBT+, and Black Latinxs were among the most supportive and spoke of feeling “represented” and “seen.” Despite this response, however, a smaller yet vocal group of Latinxs expressed outrage. One comment that, in this case, focused on Chicanxs read:

“This show is an attack on CHICANO culture and way of life with its SJW [social justice warrior] and Pc [politically correct] nonsense, that is a white man’s philosophy” (his emphasis).

Collectively, this group believed *Gentefied* was a vehicle to attack not only Chicanxs (as seen above) but Latinxs in general and was perpetrated by outsiders serving their political agendas. These two remarks are representative of the two major evaluations of *Gentefied* by Latinxs: empowering representation or an assault by outsiders. For this reason, *Gentefied*’s reception has contributed to the ongoing debate over Latinx representation (Beltrán 2017), which is intrinsically linked to the discussions over *Latinidades* (varying iterations of “Latinness”).[2]



Another promotional poster of *Gentefied* depicts

This article explores the contentious discourse prompted by *Gentefied* and how it constitutes a struggle over Latinidades. The show’s online reception provides a site for an ongoing, in-group struggle over the contours of being Latinx, as well as questioning if Latinidad is multifaceted or monolithic. Supporters of *Gentefied* have posited and indirectly endorsed a notion of “Latinidades.” They praise the ways the show depicts the racial, socioeconomic, and sexual complexity of Latinxs as a population. In particular, Latinxs with more than one marginal identity celebrated the show’s varied representations of Latinxs because it gives them oft-denied visibility in popular media.[3] Recently, Latinxs scholars have explicitly encouraged the use of *Latinidades* because it allows for—one might say, demands

Ana Morales painting Chris, Casimero 'Pops' Morales (Joaquin Cosío), and Erik on a wall in Boyle Heights.



Chris and Ana arrive at a party thrown by Tim, Ana's artistic benefactor. Later, Ana is told that she is a "gift" to the party members.



Erik and Lidia (Annie Gonzalez) in the parking lot of the doctor's office, addressing their future as parents, particularly their financial issues.



Ana nervously stands next to the unveiling of her art piece. It is made from the many signs around Boyle Heights to sell property that would then push the working-class Latinxs renters out.

—a recognition of the complexities and diversity within the Latinx population (Aparicio 2017). In their own way, *Gentefied's* fans have done so by celebrating Latinx marginality while using it as a driving force in their media interpretation.

We contend that *Gentefied's* devotees express what we call *marginal Latinidades*; this is a framework to understand how the margins of Latinx communities evaluate and create Latinx representation in fan discourse. This framework—which builds upon other works (Aparicio 2017, 2003; Báez, 2007; Goin, 2016)—is informed, guided, and animated by the media interpretations of Latinxs with multiple marginal identities. Indeed, this is what we found with *Gentefied's* fans and also some of its creators.

It is also a response to a call by Frances R. Aparicio (2017):

"I exhort to Latina/o studies scholars to reclaim [Latinidades] and deploy it in ways that allow our communities and others to exert agency and more control over the public definitions of who we are" (113).

Thus, critically understanding *marginal Latinidades* also offers a set of interpretative strategies to understand media—here acknowledging how working-class, queer, and Black Latinxs are expressing a profound sense of feeling "seen." This is largely so because they face a lack of visibility in the media (Goin, 2016; Jiménez Román and Flores, 2010; Tallaj, 2019). Thus, the public interpretations of their seldom acknowledged images as members of in-group marginalized Latinxs prompts political commentary. In fact, interpreting and publicly responding to media is often a political act (Amaya 2010; Bobo 1995; Everett 2001; Robé 2010; Staiger 2005). Knowing or unknowingly, the fact that marginal Latinxs express elation when using social media platforms is a way of asserting themselves and their oft-excluded identities in Latinidades.

Opposed to *Gentefied's* fans, detractors criticize the show's representations of Latinxs, which indicates an attempt to keep Latinidad unified and monolithic. They rhetorically expel or reify divisions with marginality (and its political views) so as to keep the notion of Latinidad singular and pure.[4] For them, dominant culture has used *Gentefied* as a vehicle to impose political agendas on Latinxs that are far outside of their community and culture. For instance, it has seemed that white liberal Americans imposes queerness onto the Latinx community, and "leftist" propaganda from "white Hollywood" imposes the show's critiques of capitalism—not Latinxs.

Ironically, the show's critics are not themselves monolithic. Some are anti-racists and anti-imperialists, some believe in a colorblind meritocracy, while others do not believe *Gentefied* has gone far enough with its inclusivity, namely for Central Americans and Afro-Latinxs. Some scholars may regard these critics as reactionaries; however, if taken seriously, they add to a rich legacy of Latinx film criticism that dates back as early as the 1910s (Gunckel 2015; Limón 1992; Noriega 1993; Serna 2006, 2014; Serna and Gunckel 2019).

Gentefied's negative and positive reception participates in an ongoing resignification of Latinidades. Latinx, as a category, is "a site of permanent political contestation" "rather than merely [a] descriptive category" (Beltrán 2010, 9). As the supporters and detractors of *Gentefied* debate what is and is not Latinidades, they perform and embody Latinidades. It is from this poststructural standpoint that we can see *Gentefied's* supporters not as apolitical admirers, critics not as reactionaries, and their dispute not as a petty quarrel over entertainment, but rather all as participants in an ongoing struggle over Latinidades.

Gentefied prompts Latinx audiences to resignify Latinidades largely because the show's production, narrative, and paratexts also participate in this process. The show offers criticism of a commodified form of Latinidad and gentrification by



A *Gentefied* advertisement depicting (from left to right) Casimero ‘Pops’ Morales, Ana, Chris, and Erik crossing a street in Boyle Heights. Erik’s shirt, which reads “NOT FOR SALE,” is a part of the anti-commodification motif seen throughout the show.



The signs over the family restaurant, “Mama Fina’s,” named after Delfina, Pop’s departed partner.



A flashback depicting Pops and Delfina young and in love.

Latinxs, thus suggesting characters’ exclusion from Latinx identity while it also explicitly traces marginal identities’ inherent intersections with Latinidades. For example, Ana Morales’ (Karrie Martin) artworks are visual examples of these political views. The show’s title alone can provoke a discussion over Latinidades, considering that it highlights class differences among Latinxs and suggests ethnic betrayal. The word “Gentefied” is a combination of the English word “gentrification” and the Spanish word *gente* “people” (read: Latinx people); thus it suggests disloyalty by wealthier Latinxs against working-class Latinxs. Latinx viewers with similar or oppositional views have been emboldened to respond about social conflicts set up within the show.

For Latinx media scholarship, media reception is of growing interest. For example, work about Latinx audiences has recently expanded thanks largely to Jillian Báez (2018, 2017, 2014), and by others (Casillas 2014; Molina-Guzmán 2010; Rojas 2004; Valdivia 2000, 2007; Vargas 2009). The same is true of the historical work on reception among specific national Latinxs groups: Mexicans (Gunckel 2015, Serna 2006) and Cubans (Mwakasege-Minaya 2020). Within this body of work, we hope to contribute by exploring the media reception and viewership of intersectionally marginalized Latinxs and the intra-community polemic over Latinidades. In the following sections, we will provide background information on *Gentefied* and its place in the media industry. We will then offer a close analysis of *Gentefied*, its positive responses from viewers, and its production practices, as well as criticism of the show.

Setting the scene

Netflix’s *Gentefied* is an U.S. comedy-drama series created by Marvin Lemus and Linda Yvette Chávez, adopted from their web series *Gente-fied* (2017). The Netflix TV series was shot on-location in Boyle Heights, a neighborhood in Los Angeles, California, and follows the Morales family. This non-nuclear family is comprised of three cousins Ana, Erik, and Chris, and their grandfather, Casimero, affectionately known as Pop. Audiences watch as they struggle to save “Mama Fina’s,” the family restaurant and their livelihood, from gentefication. Playing the Latinx gentrifier is the aptly named Rob (Wilmer Valderrama), the suit-and-tie-wearing owner of the building who is threatening evictions. Not only is “Mama Fina’s” the main source of income for the family, but it also honors its namesake, Delfina, Pop’s departed partner and grandmother to the three cousins. After much debate, the Morales family decide to increase profits by accommodating gentrifiers (in this case, the wealthy and oft-white renters living in gentrified areas); however, their actions cause some members of the community to accuse them of gentefication or facilitating the gentrifying process. Among themselves, the family members argue how best not to “sell out” or stray from tradition while staying economically afloat.

Pop’s right-hand is the uncompromisingly loyal Erik Morales, played by Boyle Heights native Joseph Julian Soria. Erik is doing his best to win back his ex-girlfriend Lidia Solis (Annie Gonzalez) and prepare for their unborn child. Ana Morales identifies as a queer Latinx artist who incorporates what she describes as “brown love” into her artwork, while also critiquing gentrification. Ana must divide up her time apart from pursuing her artistic passion; she is simultaneously caring for her sister, seeing her partner, helping out with “Mama Fina’s,” and berated by her overworked mother for not securing a practical job. In a cast with multiple Latinx origins, Ana is played by Honduran actress Kerri Martin from New Orleans.

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After a difficult conversation, Erik holds Lidia's stomach to feel for their baby kicking for the first time.



In this scene, Ana Morales' self-proclaimed aesthetics of queer "brown love" is mirrored by *Gentefied* in a self-reflexive moment. Ana blindfolds her partner, Yessika Castillo, and unveils her newly completed mural: two masculine Lucha Libre wrestlers (Mexico's professional wrestlers) kissing passionately. *Gentefied* then mirror's this same kiss with Ana and Yessika, thus, also celebrating queer "brown love."

Chris stands out among his cousins, with his more affluent background and aspirations of attending Le Cordon Bleu culinary school in Paris. For this, he is nicknamed *Güero* (white guy) and even given a "Mexican test," shown in a hilarious montage. Chris studied business in Boise, Idaho, but recently moved back to Los Angeles. He is played by the Puerto Rican-born Carlos Santos. Pop, played by Joaquin Cosio, is the patriarch of the family who cares deeply for his grandchildren. Cosio is a Mexican actor born in Nayarit and is known for his role in *Narcos: Mexico* (2018-), a detail excitedly pointed out by fans.



After being made to feel not Mexican enough, Chris takes a "Mexican test" to prove himself among his Latinx coworkers.

Family friend and Ana's partner, Yessika, is Afro-Dominican and a fierce community activist and organizer working with the advocacy group *Hermanas Poderosas* (Powerful Sisters). She is a consistent source of what Jillian Báez (2007) calls "*Latinidad feminista*—moments of female agency among and between Latinas" (112), with Ana often being the beneficiary. Yessika is played by Julissa Calderon, an Afro-Dominican from the Washington Heights section of NYC, a neighborhood comparable to Boyle Heights.

Another unofficial member of the Morales clan is Lidia. Lidia is Erik's on-and-off

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girlfriend now carrying their first child. She is described by her father as a *feminista* who, according to Erik, is allergic to toxic masculinity. Lidia is played by a native of East Los Angeles, Annie Gonzalez. Finally, we have the queer Salvadorian Norma (Brenda Banda). She is an employee at “Mama Fina’s” and displays a sharp wit. For example, when Erik asks her, “Can you keep a secret,” Norma replies, “I come from a long line of Salvadorian guerrillas. We invented secrets.” Her joke (a reference to the brutal armed conflict in El Salvador and Central America) is also an example of *Gentefied*’s dark cultural humor.

Gentefied and the history of Latinx images

The uniqueness of *Gentefied* lies in how it causes a stark divide in Latinx reception, which reflects a wider discourse surrounding representation. The debates surrounding “positive” Latinx portrayal continue among scholars and advocates and within popular discourses, all the while favoring middle-class professionalism (Beltrán 2017). In this case, the show and its positive responses stand in the face of scholars and activists who have traditionally criticized (Noriega 1993), even dismissed, working-class Latinx images as negative.

That more traditional form of film and media criticism would likely conclude that



Yessika Castillo, the community organizer and Ana Morales' partner, is played by Julissa Calderon



Erik reveals to Norma (Brenda Banda) that he is struggling to put together bail money for Pops after he was arrested for drunkenly urinating on a building development that is a major part of the gentrification in Boyle Heights.

the show's characters are new iterations of longstanding stereotypes; *Gentefied*'s characters could be deemed new-aged *bandidos* and Latina spitfires.[5] They are loud, boorish, and, as one viewer suggested, “uncivilized.” Many are laborers, lack “class,” have heavy accents, and (some may argue that) the Latina characters are hypersexualized. However, intersectional analyses of media representations and studies on reception complicate oft-simplified notions of “negative” portrayals (Bobo 1995, Gates 2018), particularly when the media-makers hold the same marginal identities as their characters. Despite these complexities in the show, however, critics of *Gentefied* drew from a history of negative depictions condemned by Latinx film criticism.

Images of Latinx produced by a white-dominated industry have long used mediated stereotypes, since the silent era, for example, with the “greaser” and later with *el bandido* (Rodriguez 1997, Ramirez Berg, 2002). Films favored the lower classes in those portrayals, which persist today with Latinxs cast in minor roles as domestic servants, service workers, and criminals (Negrón-Muntaner 2014). Products of entrenched Hollywood storytelling conventions, racialized stereotypes in U.S. media are well-documented. Latinx film criticism challenged these images in Spanish-language newspapers, like *La Crónica* from Laredo, Texas (Limón 1992, Noriega 1993, Serna and Gunckel 2019). Media activism of the social movement era in the later third of the 20th century forced the media industry to incorporate Latinxs and increase their visibility, and later activists have learned to adapt to drastic changes in media regulation and technology (Gutiérrez 2019, 2020; Jiménez 1996; Montgomery 1989; Noriega 2000; Perlman 2016). In the following decades, activists' substantial gains did not exactly continue on but permitted a form of Latinidad to enter the mainstream.

In the post-social movement era, the U.S. media, music, and advertising industries (in cahoots with the Latin American media industry, so to speak) shaped a *commodified Latinidad* in their attempts to cash into a growing Latinx population and their perception of Hispanics' buying power (Báez, 2007; Dávila, 2001; Levine, 2001). In doing so, the culture industry has constructed a monolithic understanding and image of Latinxs.

“Media studies scholars have focused on a commodified Latinidad to explain how mass media industries, especially advertising, construct a homogenous conceptualization of Latinidad, thus erasing the specific histories and cultures of specific national groups within this panethnicity” (Báez, 2007, 110).

Moreover, the media industry has epitomized its homogenization of Latinxs with the “Latin look”—dark-hair and light, or olive, skin—which privileges those in higher strata and excludes most Latinxs.[6] Positive representations of Latinx characters are often endowed with “respectability,” which means middle-class values, professional aspirations, strong family values, and adherence to hetero-cisgendered norms. These restrictions have been challenged along the way, most recently with Latinx-based shows like *Gentefied*, *Vida* (2018-2020), and *On My Block* (2018-). Among them, *Gentefied* (and its Latinx reception) stands out by criticizing *commodified Latinidad* and foregrounding working-class, LGBT+, and Black Latinxs.[7]

In the place of *commodified Latinidad*, *Gentefied* and its supporters offer expressions of *marginal Latinidades*, the literal and conceptual pluralization of “marginal Latinidad” (Goin 2016). This term was originally intended to conceptualize Afro-Latinxs' erasure in media. Here, we build on this framework to include the many Latinx identities left on the periphery of media visibility. Our use is also in agreement with many Latinx scholars' preference for pluralized Latinidades (among other terms) over singular forms (Aparicio 2017, Castañeda 2020, Roque Ramirez 2007, Rúa and García 2007). This process of speaking in the plural is in keeping with Latinxs' diversity, complexities, and transformations. It also builds on the concept of “*Latinidad feminista*,” which “transgresses

historical representations of Latinas in U.S. cinema in offering Latina subjectivities that are hybrid, fluid, and complex” (Báez 2007, 109; Aparicio 2003).[8]

If we seem to use a saturation of intellectual terms from Latinx scholarship, it is in large part because the notion of *Latinidades* is not only difficult to pin down but in constant flux; it is persistently debated over, reified, and reshaped. It is being pulled in different, sometimes opposite directions. For some authors, the debate over *Latinidades* is a major part *of* *Latinidades* (Aparicio 1999b, 10).

For our purposes, we offer *marginal Latinidades* as a set of interpretative strategies through which to make sense of media objects. It is also a set of frameworks through which to analyze media objects and examine the interplay between media interpretation and media-making by marginal Latinxs.[9] What follows is our analysis of *Gentefied*, which is informed by its reception by Latinxs, its production practices, the history of Latinx and U.S. media, and our own lived-experience as a working-class Latina and Latino (Salvadorian and Dominican, respectively).



Promotion for *Gentefied* with (from left to right) America Ferrera (executive producer, director, and actress) Linda Yvette Chávez (co-creator and writer), Monica Macer (executive producer and writer), and Marvin Lemus (co-creator, director, and writer).

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“El barrio no se vende”: towards marginal Latinidades



Chris and Erik are shown here as they and Pops receive free legal advice from Andy Cruz (America Ferrera). Erik's shirt that reads “NOT FOR SALE” is a part of the show's motif regarding its anti-commodification and anti-gentrification sentiments.

Gentefied's criticism of *commodified Latinidad* comes through its narratives of working-class Latinxs resisting various forms of commodification. This includes fighting “selling out” the community (via gentefication) and incorporating Latinx queer art and peripheral storylines, such as the struggles of a Mariachi band. Coupled with its diversity of Latinxs, *Gentefied* undermines industrial standards of *commodifying Latinidad*. However, this was not without its challenges on the part of the showrunners.

When co-creators Linda Yvette Chávez and Marvin Lemus pitched the show, they explained to media executives that they were “getting to the universal *through* the specific” (my emphasis). They meant that through specificity, rather than universalizing Latinxs, *Gentefied* would draw in audiences. Why would this need to be explained to media executives, one might ask naïvely? Their assumption is that to gain Latinxs viewership (perpetually seen as a newly worthy market demographic), a Latinx-based show must appeal to a broad and generic depiction of Latinidad so as to tap into viewers’ “buying power.” Consequently, generic Latinidad means elevating the most privileged of Latinxs identities.

Here, the runners needed to convince executives that the industry's conventional thinking about Latinxs media could be reversed; a Latinx show could center a more specific *type* of Latinxs and be successful. Even in their attempts to undermine the dominant image of Latinxs, *Gentefied*'s showrunners still follow in its logic because they, like the industry, still accept that the universal is the “Latin look.” In other words, they still accept a generic Latinx aesthetic and image that favors being Eurocentric, middle-class, heterosexual, and cisgendered to represent all Latinxs.[10] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Thus, a queer working-class Latina like Ana may be specific, but a straight, middle-class Latina like Jane from *Jane the Virgin* (2014) is the universal. One can see the latter in most Latinx-based shows, for example, *Lopez* (2016-2017), *The Baker and The Beauty* (2020), and *One Day at a Time* (2017-). Even when these characters are not affluent, they still adhere to normative standards. In contrast, *Gentefied* attempts to present diverse Latinxs and offers a complex picture of *Latinidades* that is intersectionally working-class.

Gentefied takes the oft-used image of the Latinx service worker (with its links to an essentialized Mexican origin) and gives it complexity as the show explores working-class Latinx subjectivity. However, since this is not their preferred image, affluent Latinxs, conservatives Hispanics, and those educated in racial U.S. stereotypes have reasons to favor more “respectable” portrayals of Latinxs. In fact, when Latinxs were displeased with *Gentefied*, they often called its characters stereotypes. These groups can be triggered by working-class Latinx images due to symbolic baggage from U.S. media's past offenses, particularly when media characters do not adhere to middle-class standards, often in lowbrow comedy. In its place, these Latinx viewers favor a middle-class sensibility and narratives centering on aspirational professionalism.

While the Latin Look is present in the show, *Gentefied* has a script driven more by a working-class sensibility and critiques of commodification. In fact, the scholarly



Here Yessika explains to Chris that white Americans may indulge in Latinx culture (in this case, their food); however, they do not hold the same reverence for Latinxs. While this may seem simplistic, this critique holds true of a wider and complicated industrial phenomenon and, for this reason, mirrors the scholarly critique of *commodified Latinidad* via U.S. media. Jillian Báez (2018) notes: “Latina/o commodities are

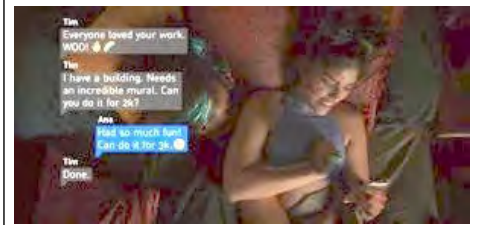
more readily accepted (and celebrated) by the mainstream than are actual Latina/o people” (23).

critique of *commodified Latinidad* is also echoed by a character in the show. For example, Latinx media scholar Báez notes: “Latina/o commodities are more readily accepted (and celebrated) by the mainstream than are actual Latina/o people” (Báez, 2018, 23). Likewise, Yessika states: “Honey, they may love all our shit, but they don’t love us.”



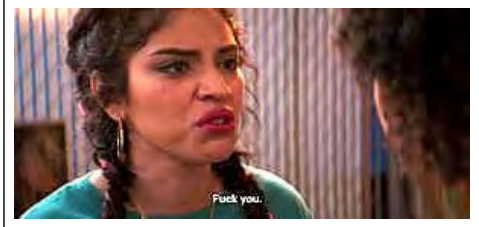
Gentefied establishes an anti-commodification critique early with this exchange between Yessika and her partner Ana. Yessika says to Ana “I am not dating a vendida (sellout) boo boo” and Ana responds, “No, you’re not, cause none of this is for sale babycakes. It’s only for you.”

This critique is also present in Ana Morales’ quest to become an artist and she is the main one to present the show’s attitude toward commodification. Ana yearns to freely express her experiences, culture, and sexuality while not “selling out.” Her perpetual reminder is her partner, Yessika, who very early on states flirtatiously: “Mm-mm. I’m not dating a *vendida* [sell-out], boo-boo,” and Ana retorts, “No, you’re not. ‘Cause none of this is for sale, babycakes.” This dialogue came with the first appearance of both characters and commenced the show’s anti-commodification motif.



Tim pays Ana for her queer Latinx art, which she knows takes advantage of her marginal identities yet plays along because she is in financial need. As soon as Ana gets home from working as an artist at Tim’s party, she receives a text from him. ...

... In the exchange of messages, Tim says, “Everyone loved your artwork! Woo!” followed with, “I have a building. Needs an incredible mural. Can you do it for 2K?” Ana responds, “Had so much fun! Can do it for 3K” Tim responds, “Done.”



Ana’s partner accuses her of “selling out” during a heated argument by suggesting that Tim is prostituting her. Yessika tells Ana, “Homeboy is your pimp,” and Ana responds with anger, “Fuck you.”

Ana’s greatest prospect for gainful employment and success as an artist is an affluent curator, Tim, who attempts at every turn to commodify her culture. For instance, when he invites her to his party and proclaims, “You are my gift to this [non-Latinx] community,” she replies, “That sounds a little problematic.” If



Tim enters his Mercedes-Benz with a license plate that reads: "RU4SALE" while Ana Morales holds his payment for completing the mural of the two wrestlers kissing.



Tim introduces Ana to Vivian, an important member of the gallery's board of directors. The tension in this scene is caused by Tim explaining Ana's value as an artist by listing her marginal identities.



A moment of frustration, Ana Morales spray paints "RAZA NOT FOR SALE!" over her own art gallery sign, revolting against the commodification of her art.

audiences needed a not-so-subtle clue, Tim's license plate on his Mercedes-Benz literally reads "RU4SALE," despite his claim that "we don't believe in commodification here." Although she is cognizant of Tim's agenda, Ana must put up with it in the hope that Tim will keep his promise of holding an exhibit for her work.

The climax of Ana's narrative comes at the opening of her exhibit during the season finale. Full of enthusiasm, Tim introduces Ana to Vivian, an important member of the gallery's board of directors. In an attempt to further "sell" Ana, Tim emphasizes each one of her marginal identities: "Ana's a queer Chicana from a low-income community." All the while, Vivian expresses approval at each of Ana's identities turned into selling points. [11] Likewise, co-creator and writer Linda Yvette Chávez explained facing a similar moment when media executives performed equal opportunity by showing her off to colleagues. In an interview, Chávez recalled "being paraded around like a little pet" and "infantilized."

Returning back to Ana's scene, the character hits a breaking point. She experiences mounting pressure from Tim's endless attempts to commodify her identities, ever-present economic difficulties, and the her partner's abandoning her for "selling out." The breaking point was learning that Vivian bought the building where "Mama Fina's" is located; thus, from her view, Vivian is the new gentrifier directly putting her family's restaurant in jeopardy. In a climactic scene introduced by 1990s Hip-Hop music, Ana spray paints over her own 10-foot-tall wall-sized art gallery placard with bright red words that read: "RAZA NOT FOR SALE!" This is revealed with a tracking shot that cuts through onlookers and stops with a low angle shot looking up at a confident Ana as she shouts, "Y'all gentrifying motherfuckers can kiss my ass...Go choke on your manchego cheese, bitches." She then drops the spray can, the proverbial "mic drop," and storms out. With this act of frustration, she reacts against the appropriation of not only a form of Latinidad (or possibly Mexicanidad) but also its marginal intersections. The scene advances *Gentefied's* anti-commodification theme through cultural productions (Ana's exhibit) and her and the show's resistance to dominant and industrial forms of Latinx representation.

While this is certainly a triumphant moment for Ana, Vivian quickly turns to ask, "Is this wall for sale? How do I bid?" The crowd begrudgingly begins to clap, Ana's mother is furious (believing that Ana has quit her job), and a bewildered Tim utters: "I think I love her." Tim and Vivian read Ana's act of rebellion as an artistic performance, which, from their view, only adds to Ana's value as an artist, but not as a human being. Thus, while Ana attempts to criticize Tim and Vivian as white commodifiers of Latinidad, Tim and Vivian read this as a cue to further commodify Latinx resistance.

Tim and Vivian disregarded this public lambasting that clearly includes them in favor of reading into Ana's act of frustration as performativity and self-referential art. To do otherwise would be to concede wrongdoing in their pursuit of profits, status, and cultural capital. We must acknowledge, however, that for those that disagree with the show's politics, this scene could be read as Ana breaking down. They even might desire another ending for Ana.

Here we would like to take a moment to entertain this thought, that is, alternative endings in which Ana appeased proponents of respectability, white liberalism, and "mainstream" sensibility. [13] Rather than her tirade, Ana could have given a compelling speech about self-determination and adversity through hardship while



The artwork shown in Ana's exhibit is from artist Emilia Cruz. In the above image, we see a quick cameo by Cruz during the exhibit in a self-referential moment.

adhering to notions of multiculturalism, colorblindness, and the American dream. Ana could have gained favor with Vivian and made some sort of deal in which her family would have kept "Mama Fina's"—admittedly, we would have liked to see this initially. Rather than take up these possibilities or others like them, the scene with Ana expresses an outburst of frustrations with her social position and a complete rejection of conformity at this moment.

Ana's economic situation places her dream of becoming a successful artist in jeopardy since, from her mother's perspective, material needs outweigh the faint possibility of making a career from art. Ana must help her mother, Beatriz Morales (Laura Patalano), with her work at a sweatshop because the mother's supervisor unjustly gives her additional work to do at home. Ana also has to watch over her younger sister.



Ana's mother, Beatriz Morales (Laura Patalano), is unjustly coerced into taking work home, or she will lose their only means of income. While her daughters help out, the financial pressure puts a strain on the family.



With mounting financial pressure, Beatriz wants her daughter, Ana, to stop "playing artist" and get a real job to help support their one-income family.

It is through Ana and her mother that *Gentefied* vividly expresses an "urban, working-class Latina subjectivity," a description derived from Báez's (2007) analysis of the film *Real Women Have Curves* (2002). Interestingly, that film also follows another Ana (played by a young America Ferrera, an executive producer of *Gentefied*) who also had a contentious relationship with her mother largely due to the pressures of labor exploitation as a seamstress but also because of gender norms. This especially resonated with us.

Just as we were, some viewers were affected by and drawn to this relationship in *Gentefied*. The trauma stemming from this Latina mother-daughter relationship under economic duress was felt by many viewers. @UlySays explicitly addresses the similar trauma that he and Ana felt and later suggests the role that economic struggles played in that relationship:

"Whoever wrote Ana's mom from #gentefied really dealt with the trauma Mexican moms be inflicting on their children with their overbearing and abusive parenting methods, and I empathize so much. She was triggering." [14]

As this article came together, we were both surprised to realize that we had difficulties watching these very scenes in *Gentefied*. We recalled frequently looking away painfully while experiencing the visceral reactions of shame because we experienced the same strained relationships with our overworked mothers.



Rob (Wilmer Valderrama), the property owner that "Mama Fina's" rents from, stops by with "gentrifiers" threatening to sell the place from under them. The tension intensifies when Erik suggests that Rob is a "sell-out" for being Latino and threatening to take away their livelihood: a traditional Mexican restaurant that serves the Latinx community in Boyle Heights.

Latinx scholar Stephanie Fetta (2018) theorized this response as "the soma," which "is a psychophysical and emotional register of our subjectivity, reflecting our response to our place in the world;" it is a display of an "internal response to external stimuli in a highly legible expression" (xiii). We cannot say for certain how many other Latinxs experienced the same, but we feel sure that we were not alone and know that it is painful moments like this that forge a sense of kinship through hardship.

Returning to *Gentefied*, the series depicts gentefication and gentrification as the commodification of a community, as in "selling out" the Latinx community. Those Latinxs who perpetuate the displacement of Boyle Heights residents are labeled *vendedores* (sellouts). For example, Erik calls Rob, the Latino property owner, a coconut (brown on the outside white on the inside) for increasing "Mama Fina's" rent; Rob threatened to sell the building without regard to their livelihood. With mounting economic pressure and after much debate, the Morales family decide to set aside tradition with innovations to their menu and renovations to their restaurant to expand their clientele to a more affluent population. However, Erik and Pops still had reservations, as did the community.



The family prepare to showcase their new menu and renovations to the new clientele moving into Boyle Heights.

Protesters from Boyle Heights react and see this upgrade as another form of gentefication since it speeds up the process of gentrification. Picketers outside "Mama Fina's" chant, "*El barrio no se vende, se ama y se defiende*" (The hood [or ghetto] is not for sale, it must be loved and defended). Among the protesters is Yessika, the strongest opponent against the displacement of the Latinx community and culture in Boyle Heights. Julissa Calderon (the actress who plays Yessika) reflects and amplifies Yessika's principles to defend the neighborhood, in an interview which will be discussed later.



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| Yessika and members of the Boyle Heights community protesting “Mama Fina’s” and their role in gentefication. | |



Javier's mariachi band celebrates their success after singing English-language songs for the first time in an attempt to cater to the new affluent residences of Boyle Heights. Javier's attempt at enjoying this moment is hampered by how the music he loves to play is being altered in order to accommodate the new affluent residences of Boyle Heights. In addition, he and his son are also being displaced by gentrification.

Outside the main storylines of saving “Mama Fina’s” and Ana’s plight, the story of a Mariachi player and his pressure to assimilate for a white audience also extends the show’s central motif. Javier (Jaime Alvarez), a musician and minor character who frequents “Mama Fina’s,” is surprisingly given an entire episode (episode 6, The Grapevine). Of late, he is not doing well; his band isn’t making enough money, his wife is still in Mexico waiting for him to secure a place for them and their young son, Danny. However, the increase in rent has made it impossible for Javier to find an apartment in or near Boyle Heights, and he is forced to live in his van with Danny before being forced out completely.



Javier seeks housing assistance from Yessika, who works at a housing advocacy organization. Their motto reads: “meeting people’s housing needs.” On the left, we see Javier waking his son up in their van, which is their new home due to displacement. Due to the inflation of rent, Javier and his son have become homeless. When he seeks housing assistant, the wait for a subsidized apartment is more than he can bear. Yessika encourages him to fill out an application, but Javier is disheartened since he cannot wait the months it will take to process.

In one sequence shown with parallel editing between Javier and his son, Javier’s Mariachi band plays a cover of *I Swear* by All-4-One, an R&B group from the 1990s. Javier’s band departs from tradition to accommodate their new affluent audience. While Javier holds tightly to tradition, he recognizes the financial need to assimilate. As they gain momentum in their performance of *I Swear*, the episode cuts to Danny (with the music becoming non-diegetic), and we watch him cope with saying goodbye to his girlfriend.



Javier’s Mariachi band is covering *I Swear*, the 1990s R&B song from the group All-4-One, to generate more interest and tips from the more affluent clientele moving into Boyle Heights. This scene is juxtaposed with Javier’s son, Danny (right), lamenting being forced out of Boyle Heights and having to leave his girlfriend behind.



The innocence of childhood is demonstrated in this scene where Danny daydreams of serenading his crush, Nayeli, as the last chance to confess his love to her before he has to move out of Boyle Heights and doesn’t know if he will ever see her again.

This points to the many moments in which immigrants are forced to assimilate in order to survive. For the first generation born in the host nation, that assimilation can be experienced through the syncretism or remixing of their parent’s home nation (in this case, Mariachi music) with their host nation (the R&B song). Furthermore, *I Swear* was originally performed as a country music song (a genre of white Americana that is said to typify the U.S.), but here it is “remixed” or translated through a historically African American musical tradition by All-4-One, whose members are African American and Latino.

This remix of a remix aptly portrays U.S.-born working-class Latinx culture that is a mixture of not only their parent’s home nation and their host nation but also the consumption and participation in U.S. Black urban culture (Vargas 2009). Thus, it is no coincidence that Danny’s age approximately matches that of the media-makers at the time *I Swear* was released. It is also the reason that the show includes R&B, Hip-Hop, and Spanish-language music. In short, the Mariachi cover of the R&B song cut with images of Danny is an expression of the working-class, first-generation, child of immigrants, Latinx experience. Before addressing the production practice that allowed for these and other moments, we feel compelled to discuss an important self-critique that escapes *Gentefied* and its audience.

As a content platform company, Netflix is in the business of commodifying Latinidad among other identities, cultures, and lived experiences. It does this not only with shows and films but also by creating identity-based subgenres like “Latino stories” and “Celebrating Hispanic Heritage.” Netflix has done the same for other identities as well as for narratives of their resistance. In that way, *Gentefied* is also a part of the subgenre “Fight-the-System TV Shows.” Thus, Netflix sells *Gentefied* as a show that *critiques* commodification and gentrification. This is evident in one of their prominent advertisements, which

reads, “This Family Is Not For Sale,” with an image of the main characters depicted in a street art style on a small brick building in Boyle Heights.



The Netflix advertisement of *Gentefied*, from their Facebook page, displays the main characters cast on a building as street art. To the right of the building reads: “THIS FAMILY IS NOT FOR SALE.” Underneath these words, and in the far distance, we see downtown, Los Angeles. A financial center and the symbolic threat of gentrification.

While *Gentefied* may critique the white middle- and upper-class commodification of Latinidad, Netflix still caters precisely to that demographic, all the while commodifying the show’s criticism as well as its Latinidad. If *Gentefied* critiques the very process that Netflix has used to make the show possible, one could consider this as hypocrisy on the part of *Gentefied*.

Others have made similar points; for example, the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* was criticized for reproducing imperialism in its criticism of the Vietnam War (Kaplan 1993), and the 1983 Cuban film *Hasta cierto punto* was called out for reproduced sexism in its criticism of machismo (Baron 2011). These contradictions could have been prevented: Francis Ford Coppola’s film could have eschewed what the late Amy Kaplan (1993, 18) describes as “the imperial context that enables its production,” and Cuban women could have been allowed to have creative control over the film by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. These changes were feasible even considering the many production challenges. However, there are very limited ways of critiquing capitalism while being outside of it, particularly in the United States.

The existence and success of a show like *Gentefied* hinges on working with large media companies (most of which are parts of conglomerates) in order to have a wide distribution or even to get on television. At the same time, being entrenched in late capitalism means that many, if not all things, are being commodified (Mandel 1975). Not allowing for Netflix (or another streaming company or television network) to commodify *Gentefied*’s political commentary and cultural expressions would likely mean its staying as a web series, thus, reaching a much smaller audience and falling into obscurity. Thus, any and all critiques of the media industry’s treatment of Latinxs (particularly ones based on commodification) from Latinx-based media producers are forced to navigate this dilemma. The showrunners did so while departing from standard industrial production practices.

Gentefied as a critique of commodified Latinidad is supported by the showrunners’ (Marvin Lemus and Linda Yvette Chávez) production practices that favor marginal Latinidades. Their self-proclaimed producerly intentions to tell



From left to right Annie Gonzalez, Julissa Caldero, Kerri Martin at a promotional interview discussing their personal connection to gentrification in their own neighborhoods, which mirror the social commentary of the show and its characters.

“our story,” meaning stories of their friends and family from their social position, necessitated particular elements that they deemed authentic. This meant that they would direct (via Lemus) and write (via Chávez) most of the episodes. They also chose the directors and writers (ones with diverse backgrounds) and shot on-location in Boyle Heights (a community that activists report is currently undergoing gentrification).

In interviews, co-creators Linda Yvette Chávez and Marvin Lemus often addressed their intentions to make *Gentefied* based on their lived experience. They created characters who held marginal identities while also casting actors who reflected those characters’ identities and, at times, political views and lived experiences. They employed creatives and performers that lived through the experiences they sought to depict. In doing so, they created varying portrayals that were well outside of the industrial standards of Latinxs representation and faced challenges for it:

“We wanted to tell stories about our people, our communities, and our families, and there was no [way to do so]...From my experience, and I’ve been doing this for a long time, every time I tried to find an open door for that, the doors would close, or the wrong people would try to take these stories out. It was very difficult. So, when [Lemus] came to me with this project. My first question was, is this paid?”

Chávez’s comments on exclusion could be viewed as addressing Latinxs in general. However, there are several indications that she is addressing ethnicity and class. These clues include

- the presence of Chávez’s working-class markers in speech, mannerisms, and tone;
- the pervasive exclusion of working-class Latinxs in the media industry;
- the absence of nepotism at her disposal;
- framing the stories as being about “our people, our communities, and our families;” and
- asking if she will be paid.

She also expressed concern about the visibility for other Latinx identities:

“It was really important to me to have an Afro-Latina character on the show. Cause I think the conversation was already happening, back then and before that. I feel like Afro-Latinos have been saying, ‘hey, we need representation.’”

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In this moment, Chávez shows an obligation to Black Latinxs' visibility, not industrial standards. While better than most television shows, *Gentefied* still only includes one Black Latinx character. Fulfilling their obligations to Latinx representation necessitated a departure from colorblind casting. As Latinx media scholar Isabel Molina-Guzmán informs us,

“Colorblind casting, also referred to as ‘blindcasting,’ assumes that skin color or other physical markers of racial or ethnic identity are irrelevant to an actor’s ability to perform the role.” (2018, 7)

For film, Mary Beltran (2005, 59) “calls the use of this type of casting ‘utopic multiculturalism.’” Showrunner Chávez, on the other hand defends casting people from the community and actors with similar identities:

“With all of our characters we were really trying hard to find folks that could really 100% connect to their identities.”[15]
[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Gentefied’s characters (and premise) necessitated non-colorblind casting; the show’s characters have specified identities, backgrounds, and political views. Changing these attributes would mean fundamentally changing the characters and the show altogether. Instead, actors were evaluated by how closely their identity and experiences ran parallel to their role, among other factors like acting experience and their performance at auditions. In other words, rather than have actors that have to step into their roles, they cast actors that already reside there.

Literally, Joseph Julian Soria is from Boyle Heights, Annie Gonzalez is from East L.A., and Julissa Calderon is from Washington Heights—an area in NYC that is comparable to Boyle Heights. Considering that these regions experienced gentrification and their residents often had similar ethnic, racial, and working-class backgrounds, it is not surprising that some of *Gentefied*’s actors not only share identities but also share views on gentrification and gentefication. Of course, not all actor/character combinations have this relation, e.g., Ana Morales (Karrie Martin), who never claimed to live through her character’s experience outside of being Latina.

The vocal criticism of gentrification by Julissa Calderon and Annie Gonzalez during interviews and promotional videos for *Gentefied* intertextually adds to the show’s critiques. No other actor/character combination other than Julissa Calderon/Yessika Castillo displays this more. Calderon, a native of Washington Heights (a Dominican barrio in NYC), addresses gentrifiers in her community: “If you gonna come to this neighborhood embrace the culture, not just the rent that is helping you out.” Her character, Yessika, states: “The fight to keep Boyle Heights for ourselves is real, and we need to come strong.” Understandably, fans used their names interchangeably when commenting on one or both of them. The line between Calderon and Yessika is further blurred when considering that the creators changed the character to better fit Calderon after several auditions. Rather than being Afro-Mexican, as the showrunners originally intended, they are both proud Afro-Dominicans living in Latinxs communities threatened by economic displacement. Calderon was not alone in her activism via publicity.

Annie Gonzalez, the actress who plays Lidia Solis, also spoke passionately about gentrification in her community in East L.A., an area that borders Boyle Heights. She states:

“They are not changing the community to better benefit the people from that community. They are changing it for selfish benefit. You’re not offering any help. You are replacing and displacing a



These images were used in the promotional video of the web series *Gente-fied* (2017), which is where the Netflix series *Gentefied* was originally adopted from.

group of people that made it to be this now, sought-after place. That has so much culture. You are going to be literally stripping it of that culture, should you come in.”

The intensity in her speech and its length, longer than cited here, made this moment feel candid and unrehearsed—as well as tense. Gonzalez’s comments connect with her character’s views and *Gentefied*’s social commentary; however, Lidia is not as vocal as Yessika. By employing actresses who have lived through the experiences of their characters, share social identities, and take similar political positions, *Gentefied* is able to further its criticism of commodification intertextually and thus exude authenticity to viewers. This is possible because paratext, such as these interviews and promotional clips, impacts audiences’ perceptions of the main text (Gray 2010). We must note that others who made *Gentefied* did not express their disdain for gentrification or any other political position, which is an industry standard.

For all of the showrunner’s efforts, authorial intent, and actress activism, *Gentefied* was not always as inclusive as it makes itself out to be. For instance, Central Americans and Afro-Latinxs are not given much screen time. *Gente-fied* (2017), the web series, was far more inclusive of Central Americans and critical of Mexican centrality. As we will soon see, these issues surrounding Central American and Black Latinx representation were also brought up by audiences.

Reception of *Gentefied*: interpreting Latinxs' marginality

Our analysis of *Gentefied*’s reception focuses primarily on Twitter and YouTube during the three-month period after the show was released in February 2020. We reviewed more than 400 comments and examined interviews with the creators and cast members. While we know that social media users self-identify (or remain anonymous), we looked for cultural, linguistic, and iconographic cues to guide us to Latinx users and their intersecting identities. We have opted to keep emojis in quotes because they are not only signifiers of emotional state but also ethnic, racial, national, gender, and queer pride. In this regard, we find an online journal to be the optimal platform for presenting this work. Our method is certainly not absolute; however, no study on social media reception can be. Nonetheless, our framework, training, and backgrounds are useful guides. [16]

The tension between the show’s supporters and detractors can be located in their perpetual redefining of Latinidades. They engage with the category of Latinx as “a site of ongoing resignifiability—as a *political* rather than merely *descriptive* category” (Beltrán 2010, 9). This means that in addressing the show, whether intentional or not, Latinxs engage in an ongoing discourse and debate that both reifies and redefines what it means to be Latinxs. In addition, this very process, for Beltrán, is a part of Latinxs as a category. In terms of *Gentefied*’s viewers, they have focused on representation, on addressing what is and is not authentic, and on what images of Latinxs should and should not be celebrated. To explore the former, we start with the show’s supporters.

One month before the February release of the show, Netflix’s official YouTube account uploaded *Gentefied*’s trailer and garnered support. Fans expressed excitement that repeatedly conveyed ethnic pride.

Mayra Espinoza posted, "Yes!! Viva La Raza 🇲🇽."

Likewise, PuertoRico413 wrote, "Omg.

Love it serie [short for seriously] 🇲🇽 I laughed and laughed

...and I cry and cry 🇲🇽 We need more series like this...viva los Latinos."

Support continued to pour in and increased once *Gentefied* was released. Latinxs expressed feelings of being represented. The comment by @juliexplores that introduced this article perfectly encapsulates the positive sentiments on social media and, thus, bears repeating. They wrote,

"I just finished watching the first episode of #Gentefied on @netflix, and I'm... emotional. To see myself so beautifully represented on such a large platform is inspiring beyond belief! More of this, please! Cannot wait to finish the season."

Likewise, @letty tweeted: "Within the first 10 minutes of *Gentefied*, I saw myself, I saw my family, and I saw my culture."

Other sources provided similar comments as Twitter and YouTube. On the podcast *Academics and Amigos*, host and Ph.D. student Anthony R. Ramirez listens as his guest, Carlos Gonzalez, explains what shows like *Gentefied* means to him:

"I'm happy that they are finally representing what I am with *On My Block* or *Gentefied* or with stuff like that. It's funny cause I'm here 36 years old, and I get all excited when I see someone that looks and sounds the way I am, cause representation matters. When I see them talk my lingo, *Gentefied*, that's perfect, bro. That's literally how it is. You know what I mean?" [17]

Gonzalez's desire for representation that looks and sounds like him is not only about ethnicity but also its intersections with class. Surely, Gonzalez could turn to the myriad of Spanish-language programs on Univision or Telemundo. Or tune into the English-language Latinx-based programs like *Jane the Virgin* (2014-2019) or shows with Latinxs as central characters like *Brooklyn 99* (2013-). Surely Gonzalez knew about shows like these since he was invited on the podcast for his impressive knowledge of popular culture. However, these other possibilities feature middle-class Latinxs characters that do not look or "sound" like Gonzalez. Other Latinxs social media users comment similarly. One tweet reads: "The Spanish that finally sounds like us." *Gentefied* uses Spanish that is not standard; it is "broken," mixed with English (Spanglish), has a regional dialect, and peppered with Spanish and English slang.

These fans, including Gonzalez, suggest that *Gentefied* (as well as *On My Block*) reflects a cultural-linguistic practice that is deeply rooted in a lower socioeconomic stratum that is not standardized yet endures and without much representation from the mainstream. In other words, "Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (Anzaldúa 1987, 54).

Fans' sentiments about media that "sounds" like them have also been a response to *Gentefied*'s sense of humor. In this way, Apocali31 jokingly offers a somewhat poetic working-class sentiment when commenting on *Gentefied*: "Mexicans cuss so deliciously. We really really do. When we cuss you out, it elevates us to a level of elation." Such creative and purposefully lowbrow humor runs throughout the show, and those viewers from a higher strata may

find it ludic and indecent. Indeed, a user, likely non-Latinx by the name of Awesome Alie, exclaims, “OMG! This series is cringy. My Mexican neighbors are way more civilized than whoever the series is trying to portray.” The loaded use of the word “civilized” can be traced to the conquest and used in today’s respectability politics, both justifying dominance and setting the boundaries of legitimacy.

Much of the class-based kinship with *Gentefied* is coded since class-based identities are less celebrated than other social identities and groups. As Mami Chula shared on YouTube,



In a heated argument about Ana's art piece depicting two *Lucha Libre* wrestlers (Mexican professional wrestling) passionately kissing, Ana is forced to keep between her queerness and her

Mami Chula's comment points to the Afro-Latinx community's continued frustration with their systematic exclusion from media. They have been neglected by the U.S. and Latin American media industry that favors the “Latin look” over all others and is particularly anti-Black.

However, it is through the Afro-Dominican actress Julissa Calderon and her performance as Yessika Castillo that Mami Chula finds a representation that she has been in search of. We consider her empowerment via Julissa a part of *Latinidades feministas*, that is to say, “moments of female agency among and between Latinas” (Báez 2007, 112). In this case, it is at the intersection of race and gender as it is shared between an Afro-Latina viewer, actor, and character. We should note that this user probably has seen a few Afro-Latina actors like Gina Torres, Zoe Saldana, and Rosario Dawson, but industrial casting practices have often placed them in African American roles (Goin 2016).

More than any actor, Julissa Calderon received the most attention, which was largely positive, whether writers addressed race or not. Jared Marcelo stated with admiration: “Bro, Julissa went from *PeroLike* to acting for Netflix. DAMN!! Proud, make that money!!!” (*Pero Like* is a YouTube show that explores diverse Latinx communities.) Another YouTube user, Agnes Paz, posted, “I lost my mind as soon as I spotted Julissa!” A similar response occurred with queer identities.

Twitter user @nevermindkaz saw themselves in Ana and her narrative. On March 27, they tweeted that

“#Gentefied on Netflix is such an amazing show. It talks about the struggles of being Mexican and queer and maintaining a connection with both cultures. This show truly made me feel heard.”

The perpetual separation of *Latinidades* and queerness is pervasive in Latinx communities and incredibly evident in many of the comments from Latinx critics of *Gentefied*. This could be the reason that queer Latinxs users expressed feeling represented through Ana since a part of her plight is managing the intersections of sexuality and ethnicity. Ana is forced to pick between being queer or Latina.

Latinx identity. The storekeeper, second from the left, wants to paint over it; however, Tim (third from the left), the owner of the building and the one who commissioned the piece, protects the mural. The storekeeper is angry that she was not consulted before the mural was on the wall and claims that it is driving away customers. Tim, on the other hand, feels that the storekeeper is motivated by homophobia. The storekeeper responds that it doesn't matter to her if Walter Mercado and Juan Gabriel are kissing. These are two well-known Latino entertainers whose sexuality was an "open secret" within the Latinx community. In the end, Tim puts his foot down by reminding the storekeeper that he can do what he pleases with *his* building. Ana is forced in the middle of this argument - desperately seeking to resolve it but failing to do so - and having to side with only one of her marginal identities represented by Tim and the Latina storekeeper.



Camila María Concepción was one of the show's writers who passed away on the date of *Gentefied's* release: February 21, 2020. They were also a trans-Latinx writer, actor, activist that believed that representation was extremely important. Concepción advocated uplifting underrepresented identities in the hopes that they would be featured both on-screen and behind the camera.

For example, in one instance, Ana is literally placed in the middle of a heated argument between Tim, her gay benefactor, and a Latina community member, listed in the credits simply as "storekeeper." Tim has commissioned a mural on his building from Ana in which she sprays paints two very masculine *Lucha Libre* wrestlers (Mexico's professional wrestlers) kissing passionately. The storekeeper was furious that she was not consulted and employed someone to paint over it. The wall is a part of her store; however, Tim reminds her that he owns the building and can do what he wants with its walls. Tim's imposition mimics gentrification's imposition, if only symbolically, while the storekeeper's rage smells of homophobia. Ana must mediate between Tim and the storekeeper just as she must manage being Latina and queer, and in this scene, she is not allowed to be both. Showing Ana managing these two sides is how *Gentefied* makes @nevermindkaz "feel heard." There are many more examples of fan appreciation for the show's inclusion.

Claudia Alarco Alarco explains: "Netflix's @Gentefied portrays authentic Latinx, Afro-Latinx, queer representation," then adds "it was all made possible because of a trans-Latina writer & activist, Camila María Concepción. Tonight, we celebrate your legacy, Camila. Tonight, we celebrate your life #Gentefied." This user takes a moment to not only celebrate the show's inclusion but also to honor the memory of a trans-Latina. There are many more endearing moments just like this one. In sum, Latinx audiences express kinship with *Gentefied* because it makes them feel represented, which seldom happens for Latinxs with more than one marginal identity.

It is unsurprising, then, that audiences become anxious over Netflix's possible cancelation of the show. Before its renewal, supporters of *Gentefied* feared it would be canceled by Netflix and thus they took to Twitter to vent and voice their concerns. They did by pointing out Netflix's failure in renewing other Latinx-based shows. "YES, DIVERSE REPRESENTATION," @Gio T1 posted, "They dropped the ball when they canceled, *One Day at a Time*, so I'm hoping this makes amends." That Latinx- and Cuban-based show was canceled by Netflix and later picked up by Pop T.V., and many fans (including the authors) were disappointed. Aria, another fan, voiced a prevailing sentiment by Latinxs: "[I] can't wait to get attached to another Latinx-centric Netflix show then live in fear of it being canceled right away after the first season drops." Since Netflix is not bound by the FCC to release ratings, it is difficult to publicly hold Netflix accountable for representation or lack thereof, as was done with network television decades before.

However, fans used other means to fight for their shows. Had *Gentefied* not been renewed, Latinx fans would have likely put together a campaign (series of tweets, retweeting, and "likes") to drum up support, as they have done with *One Day at a Time*, among other shows. The logic here is that streaming companies like Netflix will see that there is enough interest in the show for them to invest in another season. In this way, however, major streaming companies gain free advertising for their shows by exploiting Latinxs' deep desires to see themselves represented.

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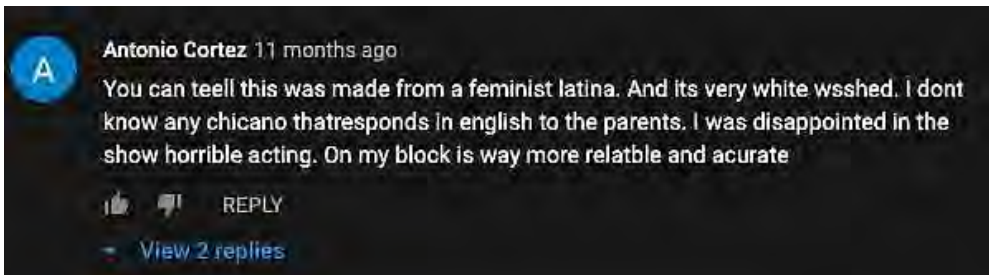
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Critics of *Gentefied*

Although in the minority, critics of *Gentefied* expressed opposition to the show's portrayals of Latinxs. They attempted to keep Latinidades unified and monolithic by disavowing representations from *Gentefied*. They accused the show of deploying stereotypes and being inauthentic largely because they saw the presence of non-Latinx marginality as impositions. These identities and political issues were deemed outside of Latinidad. Critics sought to symbolically divorce marginality from Latinidad; they wanted to keep it united rather than allow Latinxs as a population to be fractured.

One critic states, "As a Mexican American, I find this show cringey and stereotypical. White/Jewish leftist Hollywood is getting lazy with their propaganda." The inauthenticity of the show, for this viewer, stems from Hollywood, yet ironically, this claim is backed by another stereotype. Likewise, another comment reads: "Typical leftist stereotype propaganda." Accusations of spreading propaganda were nearly as common as claims of stereotyping, for example: "Actually, started to like this show until all the forced woke propaganda shit." Whether mobilizing the term "stereotype" or "propaganda," it seems that outside forces, not Latinxs, were to blame for these misrepresentations.

Similarly, feminism is considered external and imposed on Latinxs. One critic of *Gentefied* states,



In this way, critics of *Gentefied* unknowingly continue a tradition of Latinx activism (including media criticism) that seek to portray Latinxs as a cohesive group and use exclusionary tactics like framing feminism as divisiveness sparked by outside forces. For instance, Cristina Beltrán (2010) informs us that the leader of the activist group Crusade for Justice, Rodolfo 'Corky' "Gonzáles, invokes his own cultural authenticity within the community...in order to contrast this to the 'European thinking' of *femenistas*. For Gonzáles, feminism is understood as a destructive force coming from outside the Chicano community" (48). Similarly, critics of *Gentefied* suggest that feminism has no home in Latinidad.

An exclusionary logic is also used with queerness: "[The] show, it's ok. But why do they have to put all this gay stuff in it? That's not our culture, seems to me there pleasing the white man," stated one YouTube user. Another accuses the show of spreading "Luciferian leftist homosexual ideals," which "is not in our Mexican culture, stop pushing your wicked ideals to the children of the most high." Queerness and leftism are so immoral that they are equated with literal devil worshipping. This commenter is a part of a group of critics that seek to replace white supremacy with a Latinxs superiority based on ancestral, pre-colonial, and spiritual reasonings that posit

heteronormativity. Nearly always Latino (opposed to Latina or Latinx), they deploy a well-established criticism of white dominance; these viewers take anti-imperialist and cultural nationalists' positions at the expense of queer Latinxs and Latinas. The initial comment that begins this article is worth revisiting in its entirety; however, we would like to warn readers of its bigoted language:

"This show is an attack on CHICANO culture and way of life with its SJW [social justice warrior] and Pc [politically correct] nonsense that is a white man's philosophy. These colonial white tactics have to be called out. They did it to the native Americans and destroyed them, but they will not do this to the CHICANO. Stay out of our barrios and our culture with your pink hair and hate speech against men and god. Go ahead and cut the dicks off your male children and put them in dresses and give them hormones to become bitches. But stay away from our sons and daughters. We are the descendants of the Empire of the Sun and you will not represent or infect our barrios with your white man SJW/PC culture bull shit. Stop pushing this shit on us cause you're not going to like it when we push back. We don't need you. We never did!"

This strategy of evoking (or appropriating) indigeneity to uplift Latinxs is not new; however, what is notable here are the ways in which these particular critics make a blatant attempt to banish queerness and transness from Latinidades. The citation above deploys beliefs from the Inca Empire where many view themselves as the children of the sun deity, Inti.[18] Many other Latinxs critics suggest that queerness and Latinidades are unconnected.

As one online commenter states succinctly, "Mexican/Latino culture is separated from Gay Culture." As addressed earlier, this is the dilemma that Ana is forced into, one which queer Latinx viewers resonated with. While the show attempts, to some degree, to give visibility to queer Latinxs, the show's detractors assert the very opposite. Indeed, the many homophobic comments sought to remove queerness from Latinidades.

A set of critics use their belief in bootstrapping, reverse racism, and opposition to self-victimization to make their case against *Gentefied*. These positions are present in a lengthy YouTube comment in Spanish concerned with the message Latinxs are getting from *Gentefied*:

"Why do you say "La Raza is not for sale"...why do you continue with that and that you don't want tourists in Los Angeles...what is this is a race war?...enough of this...and of your egos, the rationale for racism doesn't exist...but you all do the same...there is nothing wrong with progressing and with meeting some white people that can help you while on that journey...I am disappointed with this T.V. series...instead of giving your people a reason to go forward...and not be in the shadows, you want to continue with poverty, not learn to love everyone. I don't sell myself, but I don't want to stay like those people...living each day...you are in the United States...If not, why did you come here? To work a little? The Chicanos present themselves as if they don't like work...no gentlemen, we are not in the country just to live each day...we are in this country for a better future, if you don't want that, then why continue to be in this country? No. Keep encouraging the hate of the white race...because this is their country" (our translation).

The Latina immigrant has bought into the conventional wisdom that the U.S. is a land of opportunity and that hard work leads to success. She posits a leveled playing field while claiming racism does not exist. These notions are

problematic, particularly in terms of class, because they suggest that the poor should be blamed for their poverty and that the wealthy and successful outwork all others. The statement's stark individualism blinds it from recognizing systematic oppression of any kind or that individualized inspirational philosophies do not make for a productive methodology for understanding "success" and race. Her viewpoint likely comes from lived experience extrapolated to understand what is best for all Latinxs and bolstered by dominant discourses. This commenter seeks to steer Latinxs away from critiques of racism and classism towards middle- and upper-class aspirations with a colorblind philosophy.

We find that detractors of the show, Latinxs and non-Latinxs alike, essentialize Latinidades by excluding the working-class and deeming its image inauthentic or undesirable. They seem to tactfully promote a vision of "positive" representations of Latinxs that are connected to if not entrenched in a higher socioeconomic status, culture, and decorum. In addition to the previously mentioned comparison of *Gentefied's* characters to a viewer's "more civilized" Mexican neighbors, one user writes: "Mexicans in L.A. are also doctors and police officers and work in tech. That's the real L.A. nowadays." Another states, "Typical Stereotypes, that's exactly what everyone thinks all Mexicans are. We all don't speak in accents and act like that" (johnpunx1).

Giz-bar states tactfully: "Just once I would like to see a Chicano film without all the Mexican stereotypes. The closest movie I ever seen was 'Selena'. It would be nice to see a movie we can all relate to." We are left to wonder, what was it for this viewer that enabled *Selena* (1997) to eschew Mexican stereotypes. Was it the film's middle-class sentiments? Its lesson that working hard allows for social and economic mobility? Was it because the film was family-oriented or because of its tamed expressions of sexual desire, especially from a Latina? What made *Selena* a "positive" representation?

We ask these questions because this is a part of an ongoing debate that has not favored working-class Latinxs. Latinx media scholar Mary Beltrán explains,

"Debates regarding the definition of and impact of 'positive' images of Latinas/os are also ongoing. Presenting Latinas/os as middle-class professionals have often been promoted by advocates as more desirable than presenting them as working-class, in service positions, or as not fluent in English."

Thus, it is not that working-class Latinidades are marginalized via exclusion, as is the case with Afro-Latinidad, but they are sidelined for appearing to be, at their core, "stereotypical" and undignified. The desired image of Latinxs is not working-class or poor for anti-imperialist and pro-bootstrap Latinx critics. The former favors a singular Latinidad that highlights a lineage that traces itself back to royal and spiritual indigeneity, while the latter favors proving oneself through hard work as well as universal love and partnership with white Americans. Admittedly, the defensiveness against *Gentefied's* characters is understandable when considering the history of Latinxs in U.S. media.

Consequently, there's a dilemma for those who seek to depict working-class Latinxs: their perspectives are triggering to some Latinxs (possibly educated, affluent, older generations, and conservative) since these images are associated with memories of derogatory Latinx images and for good reason. [19] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The history of negative depictions of Latinxs used the the working-class and poor, exemplified by the "greaser" of early U.S. film. Latinxs' distrust of working-class and poor Latinxs images is, in part, due to the symbolic baggage stemming from this legacy of derogatory

Images below: Underrepresentation of Afro Latinas. Yessika's character was largely on screen only when her partner, Ana, was present. Some viewers suggested that she deserved more than a supporting role because Julissa (the actress that performs Yessika) was not only very talented but also because her character was the only Afro-Latina. One Twitter user stated, "I'm really disappointed with how the Afro-Latina character, Yessika, was treated by the show. She never got her own episode, never got much background development, we don't get to see her life outside of organizing."





depictions by white-dominated U.S. media (Cripps 1983). Yet what constitutes a “negative” depiction is not universal with any social group. Thomas Cripps (1983, 49) informs us that in the mid-twentieth century, Black Americans disagreed about *Amos’ n’ Andy*:

“the NAACP had failed to cast *Amos’ n’ Andy* as an enemy of the entire black world. Instead, the show had been characterized as a slander against only the black middle class. Thus, instead of fulfilling a *Chicago Defender* prediction that the ‘disgusting’ revival of ‘stereotyping’ would ‘be crushed...by the frontal assault of an enlightened and protesting people,’ the campaign merely sputtered out.”

For the Black middle-class and activists, *Amos’ n’ Andy* was a mockery of their social group. But for the Black working-class and actors, the show was (not only entertaining but) a door opening for Black Americans to enter the television industry. Similarly, the term “stereotype” is deployed by affluent Latinxs and non-Latinxs alike against working-class Latinx images and subjectivity. Yet the term was once deployed against symbolic oppression in defense of all Latinxs; it was part of concerted and individual efforts to indict U.S. media for its exclusion of people of color from representation and production. However, attributing value to a marginal group (in this case, Latinxs) is often based on another system of oppression (in this case, socioeconomic).

Another group of Latinxs critics was also disappointed in *Gentefied*—however, for very different reasons. A few critics felt that the show did not go far enough in terms of representation. Despite the vast amount of excitement for an Afro-Latinx character, some viewers rightfully felt it was inadequate and that Julissa (the Afro-Dominican actress) deserved more than a supporting role. At its most critical, comments flirted with the notions of tokenism. Fan @Reggie S.B.2 said, “I love Julissa, but I thought she was getting a major character...I wanted something bigger for her.” One user, @DichosdeunBicho, dedicated an entire thread on the subject, beginning with the post, “I’m really disappointed with how the Afro-Latina character, Yessika, was treated by the show. She never got her own episode, never got much background development, we don’t get to see her life outside of organizing.” These are valid points. Her existence is largely based on her relationship with Ana [71-77]. However, one scene is dedicated to a young Yessika, which establishes her as Afro-Dominican from New York—although Ana is still present here, too [78-79]. Yessika is also prominently shown as leading the protests against “Mama Fina’s.” A role Yessika felt forcefully casts her as the “angry Black girl.”

Another comment read, “for once, I would like to see a story about other Central American groups, not just Mexican Americans.” @DichosdeunBicho, among others, also felt that Central Americans were not given enough screen time. Others felt that Norma was not Salvadoran enough; one stated that “the character has to be more Salvadoran, the current one isn’t, not in speech, mannerism, etc.” These moments point out how not all forms of marginal Latinidades are presented equally or presented at all on *Gentefied*. It also points to concessions that the showrunners made for Netflix since its original web series had more Central American representation and was critical of their exclusion.



A scene with a young Yessika (Catherine Estrada) and Ana (Xochitl Gomez) establishes their love affair as children as well as Yessika's background as a Dominican from NYC.

Conclusion

Gentefied's Latinx reception, media-text, and production illustrate expressions of *marginal Latinidades* that centered working-class subjectivity. The show features Latinxs of working-class background and includes intersectionally marginalized Latinxs like queer and Afro-Latinas. These oft-ignored Latinxs are given little visibility and are frequently cut off from gaining access to production. This makes the interplay of creating and interpreting media via *marginal Latinidades* uniquely suited to forge kinship, celebration, and recognition between their media-maker and audiences.

Latinxs supporters of *Gentefied* who expressed their satisfaction with the show often spoke of feeling represented, particularly from working-class, LGBT+, and Black Latinxs. If it is through U.S. media that Latinxs audiences are “in search of belonging,” as Báez (2018) informs us, then *Gentefied* is a rare example where marginal Latinxs find it. Many of these Latinxs have been and continue to be outside of the preferred U.S. image of Latinxs (the “Latin look”). The show’s fans inadvertently advanced the notion of *Latinidades*; that is to say, they suggested the identity, cultures, and political expressions of Latinxs vary and intersect with other identities and cultural practices. Quite simply, fans of *Gentefied* celebrated its representation of Latinx diversity, while the show’s opposition condemned those depictions.

Detractors of *Gentefied* largely disparaged the show on the basis of authenticity. Many criticized its depiction of Latinxs as stereotypical and unrealistic as well as unfitting of representing the Latinxs community. They believed that *Gentefied* was a creation of “leftist,” “white,” and liberal political agendas, a sort of propaganda attempting to embed their agendas into the Latinxs people and culture. Critics attempt to rhetorically separate the Latinx identity and culture from other marginal identities, political positions, and lowbrow working-class culture. In essence, they unintentionally sought to keep the notion of *Latinidades* monolithic.

From their collective view, *Latinidad* is not queer nor feminist, and a positive portrayal of Latinxs do not have accents, are not service workers, and certainly are not lazy. They are hardworking and hold themselves up with dignity. Depicting marginal groups with “dignity” is often based on and defined by the dignified; that is to say, those on higher strata. This is not to say that we all should abstain from the critical analysis of media but rather that while we do so to also be vigilant of the “ideal” image that we are positing of a marginal group because it could very easily bolster other forms of oppression.

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Notes

1. Throughout this article, we will be using the term “Latinx” a gender neutral and more inclusive term than the traditional gendered binary of Latino and Latina. However, these two terms will be used when specification is needed.

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2. Our preference is to use the term *Latinidades*; however, when others express monolithic notions of what it means to be Latinx, we will use *Latinidad* to reflect their views.

3. We should note that neither the supporters or the critics of *Gentefied* used the term “Latinidad” or “Latinidades.” These are scholarly terms used to convey, interpret, and theorize Latinxs’ attempts to understand and make claims of the essence of being Latinxs. They often used terms like “culture,” “community,” and referenced Latin America in order to essentialize or diversify what it is to be Latinxs or what it should be.

4. We purposefully use the term “Latino” and “Chicano” to reflect the views of these particular critics of *Gentefied*.

5. Admittedly, established forms of examining Latinx-made media would have probably not deemed characters stereotypes. However, audiences do not always make or want to make this distinction; those displeased with representation will jettison this point in order to voice their discontent.

6. For more examples of shows with prominent working-class Latinxs characters see *On My Block* (2018-), *Mayans MC* (2018-), *One Day at a Time* (2017-), *Cristela* (2014-2015), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), *East Los High* (2013-2017), *George Lopez* (2002-2007), and *¿Qué Pasa, USA?* (1977-1980).

7. However, we do acknowledge that a similar occurrence could be happening with *On My Block*; however, to determine this, research is needed.

8. We would like to note the term “*latinidades feministas*” was used by the Latin Feminists Group in 2007. See, Luz del Alba Acevedo, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

9. It is within this framing that we offer an analysis of *Gentefied* that diverges from longstanding and institutionalized critical analyses that are often undergirded by middle- to upper-class values and repeatedly enmeshed in respectability politics. Our critical and intersectional analysis is from a working-class Latinx standpoint, that is attuned to other marginality, and is bolstered by our non-centralized national backgrounds (Salvadorian and Dominican).

10. There are, of course, moments of departure: one trend has been to have one queer Latina character, which can be seen with *One Day at a Time*, *Brooklyn 99*, *Vida*, and *The Baker and The Beauty* (2020). However, this

form of queer Latinidades is but one of countless forms that are not permitted. The erasure of Afro-Latinxs in U.S. media continues to be rightfully pointed out by Afro-Latinxs and scholars (Goin, 2016; Jiménez Román and Flores, 2010), which is true of other Latinx groups as well. Central Americans, Dominicans, and older generations of immigrants, for example, are also not centered in popular or in-group notions of *Latinidades*. [\[return to page 2\]](#)

11. This brief moment is reminiscent of the 1990s “Latin explosion” in which Latinxs were finally given mainstream visibility via the music industry, Hollywood, and advertisements, only to have these industries coopt *Latinidad* (Báez 2007, 2018; Dávila, 2001; Levine, 2001)

12. The use of graffiti and Hip-Hop are aesthetics choice that is rooted in a history of urban disobedience and a legacy of two linked artforms that, at one time, were uncommodifiable.

13. Admittedly, a part of us hoped that Ana would have taken some version of this hypothetical route. Knowing that we also had to accommodate and navigate white-middle classness for upward mobility.

14. Whomever wrote Ana’s mom from #gentefied really dealt with the trauma Mexican moms be inflicting on their children with their overbarance and abusive parenting methods and I empathize so much. She was triggering.

15. This logic runs against industrial logic of “color blind” casting, in which role or picked solely by best part and racial/ethnic difference is ignored, which was made popular by Shonda Rhimes. [\[return to page 3\]](#)

16. We also sought to present response exactly as they were found, which means not correcting for grammatical “errors” that are often social media practices. Rather than remove emojis, we opted to leave them in as they are often used as signifiers of emotion expressions and ethnoracial and national pride via flags. In this regard, we find an online journal like *Jump Cut* to be the optimal platform for presenting this work.

17. Anthony R. Ramirez, host, and Carlos Gonzalez, guest, *Academics and Amigos*, Spotify, accessed June 6, 2020.

18. Aztlán, the ancestral home of the Aztecs, was their most pervasive symbol and concept.

19. There are other examples of middle-class racial groups displeased with their television representation on the basis of class and past negative representation. In his examination of the polemics surrounding the television adaptation of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, Thomas Cripps states: “*Amos ‘n’ Andy* arrived in full view of the television audience, complete with symbolic baggage from an older time in black history and broadcasting history. Solidly rooted in a segregated world, by its existence, even on television, it seemed to cast doubt over black social goals and to mock the newly powerful, organized black middle class” (Cripps 1983, 50). [\[return to page 4\]](#)

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The last word

Since the last issue

I know that readers wonder how long *Jump Cut* will keep going. I do too. The tasks of editing and web layout have made it a great companion in the lockdown and in my single life. I am just turning 82 and in good health and compos mentis. So, I want to go on as long as possible with putting it out.

This current issue is a giant one, with its publication delayed because of the pandemic. It is one of our best issues ever. In particular, we have groundbreaking special sections on pedagogy during the pandemic, contemporary media activism, and queer TV. Other writers already have submitted pieces for the next issue; hopefully some of you will be able to act as peer-reviewers evaluating essays as they come in or submit essays of your own. The editorial process will continue until I can no longer coordinate it.

Lots has happened politically since *Jump Cut's* last issue came out in 2019. Interestingly, some things changed fast—the lockdown, the move to online teaching, a positive shift in many people's attitudes toward gender but also a backlash. Some things moved a little—a Democratic President, a more open discussion of structural racism; and some things moved far too slowly—disparities in wealth, restoring the environment. Even though I never would have asked for a pandemic, it heartens me to see things can socially move, even worldwide, because I often feel pessimistically, "Some things never change."

In that light, the 2016 and 2020 Presidential elections have caused me to reevaluate foundational decisions in my own life. I have prided myself on identifying with the outsider, the artist, the contemplative, the revolutionary, the bohemian, the DIY media maker, the deliberately childless. I looked down on liberal feminism, working for a corporation, allying with the Democratic Party, or entering academic administration. You can read *Jump Cut's* long trajectory of editorials and see how our generation's Counterculture influenced *Jump Cut's* founders. It's our pedigree. In addition, both Chuck and I studied 19th Century European Romanticism, so we knew the background of the personal choices we were making, how those choices were related to capitalism, and how they have continued in different guises into the present. But in fact, that choice to be an outsider has consequences. It often derives from class and race privilege, and it assumes someone else will tend to the work, often tacky and discouraging, of governance.

My shock when Trump came to power and my elation when Biden won were accompanied by chagrin when I looked back at my own snobbishness regarding the moral superiority of standing apart from the mainstream. During the Trump era, I thought about what the grudges were against "progressives" across much of the Midwest, my own place of origin. In looking back, I now see in a new way how

my own rise to academic recognition, which began in primary school, was due to chance, parental status, and a meritocracy that serves capitalism well. I was smart, my father was an MD, I later went to good colleges and got a Ph.D.. The Trump era made it pretty late in life to rethink the consequences of meritocracy. Of course, as I now saw much more clearly, meritocracy leaves a lot of people behind; in fact, those not benefitting from it often understand the social structures that this “ideal” derives from and perpetuates. But for years I did not understand this. I felt, “I made it on my own.”

There was a counterbalance. My parents were both dedicated to social service, my father as a country doctor, my mother as a high school teacher. They raised us to take our identity from life in the community. Part of this derived from their never questioning bourgeois respectability, establishing one’s “good name” in that small town. There, part of professional responsibility meant taking on social tasks that needed to be done. What I did not understand theoretically I understood on a gut level: social service combined with access to higher education contributes to one’s own cultural capital, solidifying middle classness.

It is through this lens that I try to understand Trump’s rise and the large vote for him in the 2020 Presidential election, indeed the large number of supporters for political positions I find odious. In fact, I, fellow academics, the people around me, politicians labelled “Washington insiders,” people in the helping professions, and probably many of *Jump Cut’s* readers often have this kind of class privilege and cultural capital even though they may not have much money. We have benefitted from meritocracy and have not often examined its structural function. Commonly in the Trump era we heard popular suspicion of the way that progressives called on the facts to refute an argument, which is a way of expressing anxiety about how professionals and the intelligentsia get to define the terms of social life. In terms of higher education, we as educators are socially needed to provide a (narrow) pathway for class ascendancy, but Trump’s popularity indicates another deep desire that many people in the United States have—to be affirmed in their ordinariness, just as they are. Teachers have cultural capital; they have won something in the competition for secure middle-classness. Many other people are suspicious of higher education, at the same time that they want their children to have access to it. And those of us who have happily lived frugally as outsiders by choice may be leaving governance to run by itself.

I will never forget the night I went to bed assuming that Hillary Clinton would be our U.S. President-elect and woke up the following day to find Donald Trump had won. I assume many of you had the same experience. Many of *Jump Cut’s* readers are intellectuals—artists, writers, and teachers. A few of our readers have run for political office; many more are involved in political activism. Most of us agree on the value of “facts” and of the arts, and we have rationality on our side. What I am asking for now is that we work toward a clearer understanding of our own privileged position—how we are located in and both change and perpetuate this world.

I analyze my own experience here to draw a lesson from it. That is, many of us, in order to take into account versions of reality other than our own, especially minoritarian positions, need to question our own sense of what is needed, to reevaluate our own locatedness in the world, and to listen carefully to other positions both before and after we advocate for change. This kind of understanding should lead to more informed, more genuinely communal action that engages as many people as possible.

My point is not to impose a guilt trip but to assert that we are always implicated in the dominant systems of our time—race, gender, political, economic. They are in flux and contain contradictions, which we can use to create change, but we never

reach ideological or material purity. That which we create still bears traces of, even depends on, that which we would reject. People are socially connected in ways that perhaps we have not been willing to acknowledge.

As political activists, as we locate ourselves and our perspective within a broader analysis of cause and (potential) effect, we have to come to terms with the fact that in any campaign for urgent political action, there is always something left out, or the campaign itself often may have some unforeseen severe consequence. For example, many of us have experienced instances when our group or issues have been the “something left out” of a program for change. That omission, often over a long period of time, may have led us to move in a whole other political direction. In terms of unforeseen consequences, there are many examples in U.S. political history when a good-sounding campaign has had lasting negative repercussions; what immediately comes to mind is Senator Joe Biden’s 1994 war-on-crime bill that led to mass incarceration of Blacks.

In the immediate present, I understand that I and my aged cohort have been first in line for the Covid vaccine mainly because we have filled up the emergency rooms, needed more treatment and died there. Vaccinating us first was the logistical solution. On the other hand, I have seen all along that most people who have stayed at home did so because others could not: food workers across the production and distribution spectrum, health care workers including staff in care facilities, taxi drivers, and delivery and postal workers. Do they get vaccinated as fast as my aged cohort? No. Furthermore, and this is one of the issues our authors raise extensively in this issue of *Jump Cut*, the rapid and largely successful turn to online education has had deep flaws. Many teachers and students have had to combine their educational work with child rearing, a problem which educational institutions have hardly addressed. And finally, in dealing with the greatest problem of all, saving the Earth, we can hardly estimate the “who’s left out?” and “what are the consequences?” for the solutions we might agree to work for together. But we must start.

—Julia Lesage, March 30, 2021

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